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by Jon[illegible] D. Carroll

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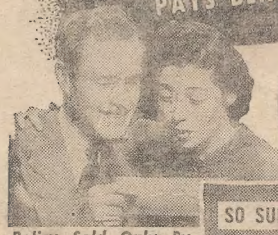

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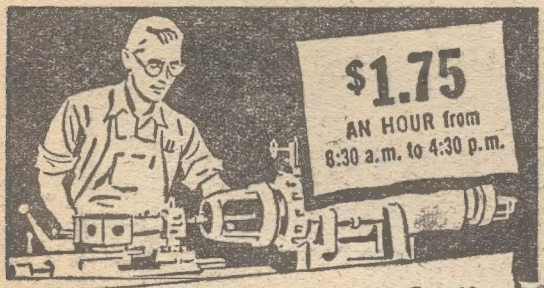

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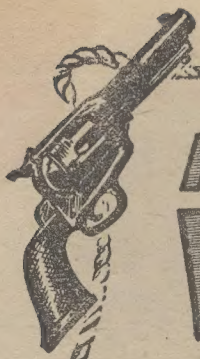

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FAMOUS WESTERN

TEN COMPLETE STORIES

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Next Issue on Sale December 1st

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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How to Be a Success in RADIO-TELEVISION

Know Your West

A Department For Western Story Readers

By Harold Gluck

NO SASS BUT SASSPARILLA

LUDLOW CITY was once described as the town with the lowest birth-rate and highest death-rate. In fact, Hiram Stuler, who ran the one and only undertaking establishment there, was on his way to becoming a wealthy man. Just now he was presiding at a secret meeting, held in the kitchen of the Martin Hotel. Tall, thin, and always dressed in that Prince Albert coat he looked like a man without a soul. But beneath his stiff shirt there was a sound heart.

"If things keep up at this rate," he remarked to the group of honest citizens assembled, "Shorty Santers will be collecting money from every citizen in this town. Either you pay or take a trip—homeward bound, or to the cemetery. I have contacted Mr. Frank Murray, who has something to say; as you probably know, his boast is that he takes no sass but sassparilla."

Every eye in the kitchen focused on the young man, who was well-armed. In his gunbelt there were two Remington .44's and in his left hand he held a Winchester rifle. Once in a fight with outlaws he had unfortunately slipped a .45 Colt's pistol cartridge into the magazine of his .44 Winchester. Cool and calm, he removed the side plates of his Winchester, removed the bullet, and replaced the plates. Then he wiped out the outlaws. But from then on, he had something important to say about guns.

"When a man gets into a close, hot fight with a dozen men shooting at him all at once, he must have his ammunition all the same kind."

He had been asked to come to this secret meeting, and had made the three day trip to Ludlow City. Time was valuable, so he came right to the point. "I guarantee to get rid of Shorty Santers. You appoint me town constable. My fee is five thousand dollars payable in advance, and a twenty per cent split on all customers I send to Mr. Stuler's establishment."

There wasn't a smile on the undertaker's face as he pinned on the badge of office that made Frank Murray a law officer. Then he handed him a package of large bills.

"Be careful as you walk down Main Street. Shorty Santers seems to have gotten wind about this secret meeting. Pete Chokia is out there, and he is a deadly killer."

Every building on one side of Main

[*Turn To Page* 8]

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Street was a saloon or gambling house, and these never closed—day or night. Wild games were played, with twenty-dollar gold pieces for chips and the roof for a limit. Keno, chuck-aluck, roulette, faro, and poker were all there to help you get rid of your money.

As Frank Murray walked down Main Street, Pete Chokia came right up to him with a six-shooter in each hand. "March before me and make up your mind. Either I drop your body at the undertaker's, or you get on your horse and leave."

Frank Murray appreciated the danger of his position but his remarkable self-possession and coolness never deserted him. Before turning to march in front of Pete Chokia, he merely remarked, "Boys, don't hit him."

Pete Chokia turned to see who were the men ready to help Frank Murray. In that split second the rifle hit him. He was stretched out cold on the ground and Frank Murray disarmed him. Then he waited until the undertaker walked up to him.

"Throw this fool into your jail; charge is attempted murder. I'm headed for Shorty's place."

SHORTY SANTERS was taking no chance. On the small balcony over the side of his bar were two of his best shots. At a signal they would finish the job just in case Pete blundered. And then into the *Happy Holiday Saloon* walked Frank Murray. He went right up to the bar and placed his rifle on it.

"A glass of sassparilla, please."

Big Mike Maloney weighed two hundred and eighty pounds. He bit off a chew of the plug he liked, then reached for a large beer-mug and poured a good shot of whiskey into it. To this he added a slug of gin, another of rum, a dash of brandy, filled the balance with beer, and dropped some of the plug into it. "Drink it mister, and let's see how tough you are."

Frank Murray took a piece of chalk from his pocket and walked slowly to the other end of the bar. He drew a target, then went back for his rifle. People moved aside.

"Watch me put three bullets into the same hole," he announced. He fired three times. There was but one hole in the target. Then while the people watched him he replaced his rifle on the bar. He lifted the glass to his mouth—and threw the contents into the bartender's face.

His two guns were out of their holsters and firing. The two killers on the balcony tumbled down; the bartender fell to the floor and decided caution would permit him to continue living. One clear voice could be heard throughout the shooting.

"I'm unarmed! You can't shoot an unarmed man."

And so Shorty Santers thus prolonged his stay upon this earth. Two days later his bags were packed and he waited for the stage coach.

"You certainly cleaned up this town. Too bad you had to come along. I was collecting more than five thousand a month here just for protection."

"I'm going to stay here. Sort of like it," replied Frank Murray. "I'll send you money now and then; bet I raise that collection to eight thousand."

Question: Can you spot the big error in this story? (The answer is on page 98.)

★

Now! The Amazing Facts about

BALDNESS

...AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

The following facts are brought to the attention of the public because of a widespread belief that nothing can be done about hair loss. This belief has no basis in medical fact. Worse, it has condemned many men and women to needless baldness by their neglect to treat certain accepted causes of hair loss.

There are six principal types of hair loss, or *alopecia*, as it is known in medical terms:

1. Alopecia from diseases of the scalp
2. Alopecia from other diseases or from an improper functioning of the body
3. Alopecia of the aged (senile baldness)
4. Alopecia areata (loss of hair in patches)
5. Alopecia of the young (premature baldness)
6. Alopecia at birth (congenital baldness)

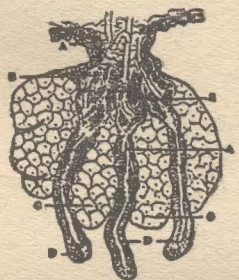
Senile, premature and congenital alopecia cannot be helped by anything now known to modern science. Alopecia from improper functioning of the body requires the advice and treatment of your family physician.

BUT MANY MEDICAL AUTHORITIES NOW BELIEVE A SPECIFIC SCALP DISEASE IS THE MOST COMMON CAUSE OF HAIR LOSS.

This disease is called Seborrhea and can be broadly classified into two clinical forms with the following symptoms:

1. *DRY SEBORRHEA:* The hair is dry, lifeless, and without gloss. A dry flaky dandruff is usually present with accompanying itchiness. Hair loss is considerable and increases with the progress of this disease.

2. *OILY SEBORRHEA:* The hair and scalp are oily and greasy. The hair is slightly sticky to the touch and has a tendency to mat together. Dandruff takes the form of head scales. Scalp is usually itchy. Hair loss is severe with baldness as the end result.



DESTRUCTION OF HAIR FOLLICLES
Caused By Seborrhea
A — Dead hairs; B — Hair-destroying bacteria; C — Hypertrophied sebaceous glands; D — Atrophic follicles.

Many doctors agree that to NEGLECT these symptoms of DRY and OILY SEBORRHEA is to INVITE BALDNESS.

Seborrhea is believed to be caused by three germ organisms — staphylococcus albus, pityrosporum ovale, and acnes bacillus.

These germs attack the sebaceous gland causing an abnormal working of this fat gland. The hair follicle, completely surrounded by the enlarged diseased sebaceous gland, then begins to atrophy. The hair produced becomes smaller and smaller until the hair follicle dies. Baldness is the inevitable result. (See illustration.)

But seborrhea can be controlled, particularly in its early stages. The three germ organisms believed to cause seborrhea, can and should be eliminated before they destroy your normal hair growth.

A post-war development, Comate Medicinal Formula kills these three germ organisms on contact. Proof of Comate's germ-killing properties has been demonstrated in laboratory tests recently conducted by one of the leading testing laboratories in America. (Complete report on file and copies are available on request.)

When used as directed, Comate Medicinal Formula controls seborrhea—stimulates the flow of blood to the scalp—helps stop scalp itch and burn—improves the appearance of your hair and scalp—helps STOP HAIR LOSS due to seborrhea. Your hair looks more attractive and alive.

You may safely follow the example of thousands who first were skeptical, then curious, and finally decided to avail themselves of Comate Medicinal Formula.

A Few of the Many Grateful Expressions By Users of Comate Medicinal Formula

"My hair was coming out for years and I tried everything. Nothing stopped it until I tried Comate. Now my hair has stopped coming out. It looks so much thicker. My friends have noticed my hair and they all say it looks so much better." —Mrs. R.E.J., Stevenson, Ala.

"Your hair formula got rid of my dandruff; my head does not itch any more. I think it is the best of all of the formulas I have used."—E.E., Hamilton, Ohio.

"Your formula is everything you claim it to be and the first 10 days trial freed me of a very bad case of dry seborrhea." —J.E.M., Long Beach, Calif.

"I do want to say that just within five days I have obtained a great improvement in my hair. I do want to thank you and the Comate Laboratories for producing such a wonderful and amazing formula."—M.M., Johnstown, Pa.

"I have found almost instant relief. My itching has stopped with one application."—J.N., Stockton, Calif.

"My hair looks thicker, not falling out like it used to. Will not be without Comate in the house."—R.W., Lonsdale, R. I.

"I haven't had any trouble with dandruff since I started using Comate."—L.W.W., Galveston, Tex.

"This formula is everything if not more than you say it is. I am very happy with what it's doing for my hair." —T.J., Las Cruces, New Mexico

"I find it stops the itch and retards the hair fall. I am thankful for the help it has given me in regard to the terrible itchiness."—R.B.L., Philadelphia, Pa.

"The bottle of Comate I got from you has done my hair so much good. My hair has been coming out and breaking off for about 21 years. It has improved so much." —Mrs. J.E., Lisbon, Ga.

Today these benefits are available to you just as they were to these sincere men and women when they first read about Comate. If your hair is thinning, over-dry or over-oily—if you are troubled with dandruff with increasing hair loss—you may well be guided by the laboratory tests and the experience of thousands of grateful men and women.

Remember, if your hair loss is due to Seborrhea, Comate CAN and MUST help you. If it is due to causes beyond the reach of Comate Medicinal Formula, you have nothing to lose because our GUARANTY POLICY assures the return of your money unless delighted. So why delay when that delay may cause irreparable damage to your hair and scalp. Just mail the coupon below.

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When they opened the coffin, Horton was lying face-down.

Only Black Jack McClain and I knew Harry Horton had to be buried fast, before anyone could examine the remains. Then came the strange story: Black Jack had the grave opened — and Horton, who'd been laid out on his back, was lying face-down when they unscrewed the lid of the coffin. And suddenly Black Jack was upset — which meant that someone else would be buried soon . . .

The Corpse Turned Over

Feature Novel of Gold Hunters' Fate

by JOHN D. CARROLL

SOMETIMES I thought it was right and sometimes I didn't think it was right; but certainly it is convenient for most everyone—except the men who are dead. Some killed because they were wronged.

Others killed for the gold that was in it. You couldn't tell always who had the claim staked out first. A man killed saying it was his, and he took it, and that was the end of that.

I don't mean a man making a business of it; he couldn't very well do that. There was Cheerful Joe Maloney, who was always accusing. There were four that he shot, saying it was his stake. Then one day Little Larry Toue shot him through the back. Larry explained simply that he thought Joe was misunderstanding his right to a claim—and he never was smart enough to argue with Joe.

That was Little Larry's only explanation for the killing of Cheerful Joe, and the boys nodded their heads and thought it was fair enough.

They talked about a sheriff and all that, but there didn't seem much sense in it; if a lad was dead you couldn't do nothing for him.

Most of the men were tough enough and hard enough; yes, and honest enough—but they fought hard and they worked hard and they drank hard and they died hard out there in the cold and the snow.

Me—I don't know. They used to kid me a lot as a softie, because I came from New York. But I had lived along the Bowery and Delancey Street and had slept in doorways or alleys.

No cops here in Blue Blazes to kick you out of doorways, and few men so mean as to knock you away from a fire. Though some of the stores wouldn't let you curl up around the heat, there wasn't a saloon-owner that would chuck you out on a bitter night.

Things were pretty settled in Blue Blazes when I got there. I had trouble crossing the country, and it was well along in 1899 before I really got into things. A man whose partner got in a fight coming up on the boat, and got himself knifed and knocked overboard, took me along to help him with his outfit.

It's no place for a kid. I mean out after gold. So after I was robbed plenty, starved some, kicked around a bit, I finally wound up at the *Paradise Palace Saloon.* I could make myself useful there.

Why not? The girls thought I was cute. The men never thought I was horning in on their time, and if I knocked off a little loose change now and then no one made a fuss over it. Also I could play the piano when One-Eyed Dugan couldn't be made to sit at the piano no matter how you tried to balance him. And when the boys wanted music—they wanted music. Though the music-box in the corner was big and mighty good, it couldn't pound it out to be heard over the noise.

As for the gramophone—it would get choked up with cigar butts and plugs of tobacco before the evening half got under way. The big mouth of the horn was too much of a temptation—even for them who had never seen a gramaphone before.

I got hold of the thing and fixed it up again. Early in the morning, when the saloon was quiet, I used to put on the records for the girls. Good times those. There was a lad called Jackson who used to sing on the gramophone and I learned to sing and play *Asleep in the Deep, Sliding Down My Cellar Door, The Streets of Cairo*—and my favorite song, *Jane.*

Sure it was nice. No cops; no law and order. I come from New York and the Bowery and I should have seen what would happen and it did. A gang formed. Not a big one; but it meant a change in the North where every man was for himself. Black Jack McClain started it—or maybe he didn't, but a few of the real bad guys who had overstepped things attached themselves to Black Jack McClain.

NOT THAT Black Jack needed anyone's help or support. He was that quick with a gun that you didn't even know it was in his hand before there was a hole between your eyes, or the neck missing from the bottle in your hand if he was in a playful mood. The *Paradise Palace Saloon* had about

the biggest bar you ever set eyes on—yet Black Jack could nail a five of spades to the wall at the end of it—swing draw and take the spots out of it with his heavy forty-four.

No, Black Jack didn't need any gang when it came to shooting—before him, or to his right, or to his left; he was that quick. But he had done a lot of loose and unpopular shooting and to have a man—or two, or even four—walking behind him—maybe that was what kept him walking. He had done pretty well for himself, and I guess the boys were afraid of him. More than one who had struck it rich disappeared, or was found dead. But no one knew for certain that Black Jack put the lead in them—and no one tried too hard to find out. Few in Blue Blazes believed that there was a man living who could put a bullet in the front of Black Jack McClain. And now with the lads that walked behind him—there wasn't much chance for one in his back.

Sure we had all heard of The Wolf. His name was a legend in the North—and a terror back in 'Frisco, and up and down the Barbary Coast. But The Wolf was someone you talked about and never saw, and only half believed in.

Black Jack had never seen him—but it riled him if a stranger came in and talked about The Wolf's art with a gun. But they never said nothing; Black Jack's temper was too well known for that. As for me, I had seen Black Jack shoot and I hadn't seen The Wolf—but I thought the talk about the quickness of The Wolf was just that, talk and nothing more.

But it riled Black Jack, and one night he put it straight up to Long Slim Pete, the gambler. "You've seen The Wolf and you've seen me," Black Jack said. "And I want to know honest, Pete—just where The Wolf would stand."

Black Jack stood looking down at Long Slim Pete, his feet wide apart, a gun hanging ready for either hand. Pete was looking up at him—no gun showing, for Pete never showed a gun. He carried one stuck inside his belt—but got at it mighty quick. Now this was a bad night to ask Pete, For Pete made a lot of his money playing blackjack with old Bull Raymond who had just turned up dead off the trail—and Black Jack was mentioned for the kill—though not out loud. Besides which, Black Jack got his name in a peculiar way I never could understand. They called him Jack because that was his name; but they called him Black Jack because he was known for never playing the game.

PETE HEMMED and he hawed, but Black Jack kept pushing him, and a crowd got round. Now I knew that Pete was drinking more than usual because I had served him, but I thought, like the others, that Pete would blow Black Jack up and make him happy, for Pete was that way—a careful man who intended to live long. But if it was the whiskey or the loss of his best customer—or just that a man can take so much, I don't know. But Black Jack was pressing him hard.

"Come on, Pete," he said. "You've been up and down the coast and seen The Wolf on many occasions. You're a man to know. The boys here respect your opinion—and so do I. The truth now—my hand moves a fraction of an inch—and The Wolf is dead before he ever falls to his knees to pray."

Pete turned his head and put those steel like eyes on Black Jack. Then he came slowly to his feet, pulled himself to his full height and looked hard down at Black Jack. Then he said simply and without a flicker of those eyes. "You reach for your gun," he said slowly and deliberately, "and The Wolf sees the movement. That is how it is, eh? Well, Jack McClain, you'd be as dead as ever Bull Raymond is before you ever got a gun out of its holster."

2

LONG SLIM PETE turned, pulled his greatcoat tightly about him, and strode out into the night. You can't kill men with a look; I know that. For Long Slim Pete was still alive when the door closed after him.

Black Jack laughed, but it sounded like a dog-sledge in the spring when the runners scrape on hard stone.

Plenty men in that saloon knew that Long Slim would be dead before the week was out. And they were wrong. Gamblers are wise. Yes, and the ones I knew in the North were honest men. Long Slim knew so much about life that the odds were always with him. But one thing I didn't think Long Slim knew—so much about death that the odds were always in his favor. But before dawn next morning I knew that, too.

Big Barbara got me aside about an hour later. "Listen, Creepy," she told me. "Go down to Ruben's place. Long Slim Pete wants a word with you; there'll be money in it for you." She leaned down then and gave me a hug and kiss. When I tried to jerk free, she burst out laughing. "You're growing up, Creepy, and they tell me you're saving your money—and you'll be a catch for a girl in a couple of years." And she let me go.

Ruben's was pitch dark; there was no moon that night. But Slim Pete felt me or smelled me out for he opened the door and pulled me inside. He was packing his bags and had an old trunk full of stuff.

"I was a fool tonight, Creepy," he told me. "But I was ready to leave, anyway—and what I said might soften Black Jack up with some of the boys." He handed me a pouch full of silver dollars. "A few hundred one way or the other, Creepy. Not much dough up here in the snow—but a lot of money if you ever get back under those elevated pillars on the Bowery. You could be a wisenheimer for a year with that sort of money in *Dave's Saloon*."

"You know the Bowery? You've been there?"

"Been there!" Pete laughed. "Creepy, you'd be hard put to name a place in this world I haven't been to—even a professor of geography would have his trouble. I got an easy job for you—" He handed me an envelope. "There's my name and address in 'Frisco on that envelope—stamped and all—to send me—if—well—if things go terribly wrong with Nancy Horton."

"Yes—yes." I nodded absently as he knelt on one of his bags and snapped the lock, for Slim and his kind didn't go in for packs like the others. "You're sweet on her, aren't you?" I asked.

"Creepy," he said, "you're a kid. Men get shot for that sort of talk. She's married. Her husband is a fine man, and Black Jack has his eye on her. If it wasn't for men—yes, these men here even—respecting a good woman, he'd have moved in."

"Horton," I said indignantly, "never should have brought her here."

"You're talking through the mouth of Jake Grunden," Pete said, "and other men. No—he shouldn't have brought her here." And turning and gripping my arm. "I'd like to blame him for that too, Creepy. But you see, he loves her—and if he loves her like—well like—you or I might love a

woman—well—I'd have brought her, too. Now I've got to move on."

Then he told me what I was to do for the pouch of silver and where the dogs must be waiting—and that I would tell Olaf the Swede he must move at once. He said: "Harnessed and ready, Creepy. Just to the river. And I must be far on my way before daylight."

There was more, but not much more. I told Pete he'd never make it, that the river would be iced up. But he knew the currents and said he'd get a boat and he could shoot the rapids—and maybe he could, for the real cold, the long terrible cold, had not set in. Yes. I guess he knew, did Slim Pete. He always knew.

I DID MY part for the silver was heavy. I near froze. It was after two when I crept in the back of the *Paradise Palace Saloon* and staggered to the stove. "Creepy." No, I didn't like the name. But I was little and fast; and when there was trouble, maybe I did creep out of a place. I had done it in a saloon-shooting back on the Bowery; I had done it twice in the *Paradise Palace*. Just drunken shooting, for Jake Grunden who owned and ran the *Paradise Palace* didn't like private killings in his place. How did he prevent them? I never knew that, but Grunden had a way about him.

I shivered over the fire a bit—got warm. Anyway, less cold. I got my fingers moving and my mittens off and was putting another log in the stove when Grunden spoke behind me.

"Late, Creepy," he said, and when I half turned, "Oh, warm yourself, boy. And a slug of the stuff won't hurt you none. You're a good kid, Creepy. And I'm a worried man tonight." And then. "Tell me, Creepy—should I worry about Long Slim Pete? I like him."

I looked into Grunden's steady somber eyes. "Nixey on your tintype," I told him. "Nothing to worry about—from man."

"Elements maybe." Grunden nodded. "Would you be thinking he'd need help from man now—a man like me, maybe?"

"No—he won't." I made it strong. "Don't you worry; he'll take care of himself. If he has 'til morning."

"Oh, he'll have 'til morning." Grunden smiled. And if he saw the bulge under my coat, and he saw everything, he said nothing about it. "There's a drink in the cabinet, Creepy." And as he turned to leave, "It isn't always the best judgment to tell what you know—even if you are right."

"And was Slim right?" I asked. There was doubt in my voice, for I've seen a lot of men and a lot of guns but nothing like Black Jack.

"Oh, yes; he was right," Grunden said. "That's between you and me and the stove, Creepy. So if you ever meet The Wolf, you won't pull a gun on him."

"I wouldn't know him," I said.

"You'd know him before you died." Grunden nodded grimly. "He's not a bad lad. I pulled a gun on him once, Creepy."

"You—you did?"

"Yes, Creepy. I'm quite a shot you know. Got to be."

"And—you're not dead?"

"Hardly." Grunden had a grim smile. "That's why I say he's not a bad lad. I wasn't able to shoot a gun again for over three months. He hit the gun in my hand—it fell to the floor, but broke three of my fingers."

"He—missed you then."

"Yes, deliberately. He shot the gun out of my hand. He kills when he wants to kill."

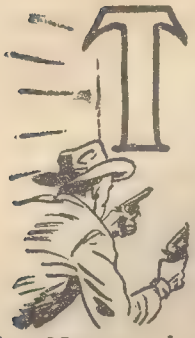
"What—does he look like?"

"I don't think he'd like me to tell you that, Creepy. Good night."

"Good night," I said.

He left then, but I didn't take the drink. I got my book out from behind the bottle in the cabinet. It was cold where I slept and I wanted to read. It was about a trip around the world. Not a new book—"Innocents Abroad" by Mark Twain. It was a good book—though there were times when I don't think the writer was altogether serious.

3



THE NEXT day I brought some soup up to Nancy Horton. The girls used to send a lot of things up to her—though they didn't often go themselves. It was hard to understand that—but as Tiny Bella said, it would give Nancy a bad name, them being saloon girls.

"There aren't many what they call good women up here in the North," Tiny Bella told me. "Nancy Horton is about the only one of them—close to these parts I mean."

There was the Tinker's wife and Aaron's wife—down the river a pace. Aaron used to outfit a lot of the boys when they were broke and charge them plenty for it on a share basis.

There was Charlie's wife—the man who owned the store. And his daughter, too, that had been married until her husband left his claim and just tramped off through the snow.

Tiny Bella laughed when I brought their names up as "good" women.

"They're good, Creepy, because they have to be good; and you got to be pretty bad to be that good up here."

I used to go up the trail and spend a bit of time with Nancy Horton myself. She wasn't much more than a kid—and it wasn't the kind of married life I'd like for my wife, if and when I took one. Maybe Harry Horton did want to be rich for her—but she didn't fit into the picture. Somehow, you saw her with rose gardens and sunshine—like summer all the time. And though she made a pretty picture there against the snow, looking off at nothing but whiteness, it seemed like she was in the wrong place.

"Harry's got enough money, Georgie," she said. She always called me Georgie, never Creepy. "Not to build castles, and buy yachts and lay on his back for the rest of his life, but more than what we came up here for. Enough to start a big printing business. Not a little one like he would have given his right arm for less than a year ago. I don't know where he'd hid it, but he's had luck."

"They never have luck," I told her. "I've seen them come and go. Yes, and die—" And when her eyes opened wide, "I don't mean that, exactly—but it's like Pete said; it gets in their blood. It's all or nothing."

"Pete." She wasn't listening to the rest. "I heard—well—Black Jack McClain. There were words the other night. It wasn't—it wasn't anything to do with me—" And quick-like, "I mean anything to do with Harry and me?"

"No," I said. And then I grinned. "Pete just set Black Jack down; set him down hard right in front of his own boys, Toad Johnson being one of them. He's Black Jack's right-hand man. Black Jack—sort of bothers you when Harry's away?"

"No—no—" And as if the words tore out of her, "Yes. He does, Creepy—er—Georgie." And I could see she was more than upset for she didn't forget like that on that name of mine. "Pete's all right. Then he—he's taken a trip down the river."

Almost like the Bowery it was. That leak. Everyone knowing everything without no one telling. I said that I guessed Pete had gone.

"Not for long, Georgie." She gripped my shoulder. "He wouldn't go for long. I—well, Harry and Pete were friends."

"He's gone for good, Nancy," I told her, and even though she took it rough and sort of pulled at her throat, I finished it off. "People all talk nice about you, Nancy. Pete wouldn't want it otherwise." And going over and sitting on the bench beside her, "I can get to him for you; he seen to that."

"Yes—yes—" And then, "I mean,

yes, he would. They didn't—who talked, Georgie?"

"No one," I told her. "And no one is going to. Pete lit out before they could. I think that is the reason he jumped Black Jack. No one will ever think other than that's why he left."

"But there wasn't any reason—any other reason. And I don't think Pete—I didn't think—he'd run away from Black Jack."

"He didn't." I was sure of my ground now because after so much doubt, I was sure of Pete. "Gold gets them up here, Nancy. But Pete has his trade. Wise men get enough gold and run away from it. Some other things are like gold. Maybe Pete just up and run away from something that was gold to him."

"Georgie." She looked at me. "You're quite a philosopher. You're—Georgie, that never came out of your own head. Pete—Pete said it—" She didn't seem mad—more pleased.

"Maybe," I told her, but I didn't think so. "Maybe Big Barbara said it; it don't seem now like I made it up alone."

"Pete should have stayed," she said like she meant it, too.

"No, he shouldn't," I defended Pete. "You're Harry Horton's woman. The time you feel he's not taking care of you—that's the time you should find a man who—who—" I stopped dead from the look in her eyes. Then I blurted out, "That's not me talking now; that's the girls talking."

"Harry's a good man, Georgie, a very good man. What he's doing—he's doing for me. I know that. I believe that. I—I must believe that."

"I guess maybe you're right, Nancy. I guess maybe Pete believe that. I guess maybe Pete wanted you to believe it anyway."

WE DIDN'T say anything about Harry's long absence. Not days this time; it had run into weeks. Harry Horton wasn't a weak man in other ways. He fought the cold and the snow and the wind. But he was a bible-reading man—a bible-quoting man, too. Now no one had any objections to that—most men were for it. But they didn't like Harry ranting against them and the whisky and the girls—his trying to make other men live as he told them to live. Men feel that those things are between themselves and their God—not between themselves and Harry Horton.

They figured there were certain parts not written for the North—at least not for Blue Blazes. Like not killing—never. Now Jake Grunden was a bible-reading man—but he skipped those parts. He said it was just as bad to let a man kill you, as for you to kill him. Worse even, because you put a sin on another man's soul—instead of bearing the burden yourself.

I had more to say, but I knew better than to say it. I was hearing too much talk around from those bad "good" women who were saying Nancy Horton wasn't any better than she should be.

Rough men. Uncivilized men. Men who shot and killed at the drop of a hat. Hard profane men. I've heard them called about everything. Maybe so. But Harry Horton didn't come back. He wasn't a sociable man; he wasn't a well-liked man. He had told them in so many words what he thought of the life they led. And those same men—perhaps those you'd call the worst of them—dropped their mad hunt for gold, or gave up a few good drunks—and sank their faces into the roaring wind of the North—to look for him.

They didn't find him. But two of them died on the trail, and another was swept off by the river. It was rotten weather, even for that time of year. None of them liked him; some of them cursed him. Those who searched for him the hardest and the longest—and those who died for him. It was simply part of their lives—part of their deaths, too. Like them, he was part of the North. Friends and enemies banded together against the elements—against what Grunden called The Great White Death.

Nancy had to wait for him. Everyone believed that he was dead; everyone knew that he was dead. There was no place for him to go. Yet, every man knew someone who had told him of the miracle of the lost returning—even from the White Death—and some few experienced, or claimed to have experienced, the fact of seeing such a man return.

Black Jack took over the care of Nancy Horton. He said Harry Horton had asked him to, and he let it be known that as a friend of her husband, he'd resent any help given to Nancy. And that was the only reason then, and the only reason later, that Nancy Horton didn't have a barrelfull of money dumped in her lap.

Three months later, it was me who found the body of Harry Horton. It was me who first stuck my fingers through the hole in his jacket and into the hole in his back.

4

IT WASN'T too far from town and the *Paradise Palace Saloon*. I remember my dash back to the trail, and how my snowshoes flew over the white death. I remember, too, meeting Toad Johnston on the trail and telling him about the body, and never thinking until afterwards that he was the right hand of Black Jack McClain.

One thing was in my mind only: the *Paradise Saloon*, and Grunden. He would know what to do, what to say. Men were killed all right. Shot down on the street in town—in the front or in the back—but the wrong was recognized, or the liquor was running high. But out on the snow—and through the back. No. No one liked it out on the trail; they called it murder.

It was Harry Horton all right, for I had turned the body over and his eyes had looked—well they had been there right in front of mine. And his face was the same as it had been the last time I had seen him. Like he had slept. Cold and hard and uncomfortable. And stiff as a board, too—for I had rolled him over like you might have rolled a log. No give to him.

Grunden was behind the bar, and knew the moment I came in the door. He had me by the arm and into the little room off the kitchen and the door shut before he let me blurt it out.

"Horton—" I gasped. "Deader than hell, and shot through the back—and up off the West Trail—and Black Jack McClain done for him sure!"

"Easy does it, Creepy," he said, and though there was no change in his voice his fingers bit into my arm. Then he let me tell my story—and nodded and—his face screwed up when I told him about meeting Toad Johnston.

"Did you, Creepy?" He was back to normal now. "Say anything about the lead in Horton's back?"

"I don't—no, I remember now—I didn't; I had to get to you."

"Good," he said. "Say nothing until we see—" He paused and rubbed at his chin. "We'll tell the boys, Creepy, and go after him. And mind you—never a word about the hole in his back until—until—well until I tell you to."

It didn't take long; it never does. Olaf the Swede had a dog-team out front, and where Swede don't associate too much with us about town, he was agreeable to take the pack up the trail.

At that, we didn't make it in time. They were off the trail, all right—but we saw them meet: Toad and Black Jack. We saw them talk and saw them lay the body on the sleigh. There was nothing to do but greet them.

Nothing for me, either, but to feel the grip of Grunden's hand on my arm and listen to his whispered words. "Don't say anything to anyone about the shot in the back, Creepy." And when I looked up at him, surprised I

guess, "We'll know then if Black Jack had a hand in it."

We knew all right. Black Jack took charge of things. Sad Sam Swan took care of the body for Black Jack. That's right—for Black Jack. Nancy was there when we came in. Women are funny. She didn't cry then. Took it all very calmly, asked questions, and wanted to know how he died.

Black Jack told her and Sad Sam nodded his agreement.

"Lost in the snow," he said. "Hold your head up, Nancy. I knew Harry well. What he did—he did. There were big things on his mind. He foresaw danger. 'You'll take care of Nancy, won't you Jack'—were his words to me." He turned and faced Toad Johnston and another of his boys. "Almost to the letter his words—" said Toad and the other added, "Word for word—as I recall it."

"Not a mark on him," said Sad Sam. "Just froze he did."

And Nancy looked up, quickly. "What do you mean—not a mark on him?"

Sam half-stuttered, and then covering his confusion like he hadn't wanted to say it and alarm Nancy. "No animal touched him, I mean."

SO THAT was it. I looked at Grunden, but he said nothing. He had been right though; not a mark on him.

No, nothing but the hole in his back from a heavy rifle; and Black Jack kept it quiet. No one got a look at that body except Sad Sam who dressed Horton up elegant in a long coat, a black tie, and a clean white shirt. No one could say that Harry Horton didn't look beautiful.

But what I mean about Nancy being funny. She took the death of Harry like she was used to having a husband found dead most every day. That is, she did until I took her home; then she busted up altogether and went on something awful. Why she couldn't have done it when there were plenty of people around I don't know.

"He's dead, Georgie," she cried, clutching both my hands as she lay on the bed by the fire. "Dead and gone—and I didn't see him—and he loved me in his way—wanted to give me everything because— Oh, Georgie. He kept telling me I didn't love him—and I kept denying it—and I—I—didn't, Georgie. Not like a woman should love a man."

I hush-hushed and cluck-clucked her, not knowing what to do and not liking to send for anyone when she was like that.

"But he never could have known it, Georgie. Never could. I would have died if he ever found out. And I was true—and—Georgie, I tried to be a good wife to him."

"You were," I told her, and no blarney either. "Everyone said you were. Following him up here—living like you do—alone but for them books you read over and over. They all said you were a good woman. And Pete most of all—he said so."

"Did he, Georgie?" She never mentioned the others. "Did he, Georgie?"

I quieted her down and told her she mustn't talk like that, and I'd get some of the women in to stay with her—and for a good woman she picked the "bad" ones to come. Though, like I said, I'd pick the bad ones in a pinch myself. But Black Jack, he was in on that, too. Tiny Bella and Sadie got turned away at the door by the Tink-

er's wife, and Mrs. Small who was fat and neither bad nor good I guess. She was just regular, kind of old, but not too old, and kind of laughing a lot. She was Old Ray Small's wife—and had come up a year before to see that he took more interest in gold than in whiskey.

I thought Grunden ducked me that night, but he didn't; he took me into his own room and spoke his piece.

"You're young, Creepy," he said. "Your mind runs to romance and adventure, less you wouldn't be here." Which was his thoughts but not fact, for I was sinking heavy dough away to go down the river—and ride back across the states to New York and maybe smoke big black cigars—though I wasn't too set on the big black cigar end of it. But Grunden was going on.

"You want vengeance—for it can't be justice, seeing that there is no law and order. You're young—and it's in your heart to lie low some night and take aim and stick Black Jack's face down hard in the snow where Harry Horton's was. Maybe you can do it—maybe you can't. But either way you open up trouble for yourself. Harry Horton is dead; nothing can bring him back to life."

"He shot him down in cold blood," I said. "He left Nancy a widow."

"He left her no worse than what she was. He was not much of a provider for her, was Horton. He was not much of a companion—nor a protector to her." Grunden took the big black cigar out of his mouth. "Black Jack has declared himself, Creepy. He's going to let a decent interval pass—then marry the widow."

"But—but suppose she don't want him?"

"Black Jack," he said slowly, "hadn't thought on that; nor had I. Nor had you better think on it. He grows stronger and stronger." He came over and put both his hands on my shoulders. "I want your oath, Creepy, for your own good and mine—that you won't say nothing to a living soul."

Grunden had a look in his eyes. Grunden I suppose was right; he had seen a lot more life, yes and death too, than I had. I knew what he expected from me. I knew the results if I hesitated. I gave him the oath—about not saying nothing.

Then I went off myself and wrote a letter to Long Slim Pete. I sent it quiet and secret. Money did that; my money.

5

I DIDN'T know why Black Jack knocked me down; that is, I wasn't sure. It wasn't because I rocked over his whiskey-glass. Was it because he thought I visited Nancy too much? Or because I found the body of Harry Horton before he was ready for it. I didn't know; that was the first time he knocked me down.

Now I have been knocked down before. Mostly I duck—take the blow a little and spill myself out on the floor. Men don't like to see a kid knocked around. And it was nothing for the lad who did it by accident, or temper, to toss me a handful of silver dollars. That's why I took it—always fell and even encouraged it. Most of those men in the North thought that only gold—only money counted. As far as I was concerned they were right; I'd take a punch in the nose or a knock down any day if there was enough money in it. There always was.

Black Jack knocked me down with a vicious backhand swipe across my jaw and cursed me for a "clumsy lout"; I didn't pretend to fall. I didn't have to. And he didn't toss me even a lead silver dollar.

Also I was thinking of Grunden. I knew everyone feared Black Jack—that is, I thought everyone but Grun-

den. I didn't know there was the man born who Grunden feared—nor the man to be born that he would fear. But certainly he must have feared Black Jack. Else why make me keep quiet about the gun-shot—and most of all, keeping quiet himself. It was hard to believe that talk of justice and vengeance, and not bringing a guy back to life. But mostly he had said about minding our own business—or his business.

So I had a let-down about Grunden. I had looked up to him. No one ever bothered Grunden; no one stepped on his toes. Grunden took no guff from anyone. It sort of hurt me that he'd take guff from—yes, even from Black Jack.

Then came the night—not too far later—when Black Jack knocked me down again. This time he had been drinking a little too much—which was not Black Jack's way. And this time he was in an ugly mood, which was sometimes Black Jack's way. And when he was ugly—and it was different than other ugly men. Black Jack was really ugly.

He knocked me down not far from the bar—and deliberately and viciously kicked me in the stomach. Then he swaggered, or staggered, over to his table not five feet from me. Men saw it. Men turned but said nothing. Big Barbara helped me to my feet, and one or two of the girls started to speak—then shut up as Grunden came from the end of the bar and shushed them. There was the big black cigar in the side of his mouth. His eyes were like ice, coated on steel. There sat Black Jack with Toad Johnston and a few of his boys leering at me.

Grunden walked straight to Black Jack's table. He leaned forward and spoke to Black Jack. Though his voice never raised his words were clear in the dead silence of that barroom.

"Jack McClain," he said very slowly and deliberately. He took the cigar from his mouth and pointed it at Black Jack. "I'm not a man to hunt for words—nor choose them. This is my bar; this is my place; that boy is part of this place. You're reputed to be the best shot and quickest on the draw in this here whole of the North. Mark this then. You lay so much as a hand on that boy again—then pray by every god you know that you get a chance to reach for that gun of yours before you're so cold that devils will be skating on your chest."

I GUESS I had been wrong about Grunden. This was his business, and I was part of his business. He was respected mighty high through the North. He was holding that respect now.

Black Jack's eyes grew wide and less bleary and you could see him sobering up by the second. His voice wasn't thick when he spoke. He said: "Jake—Jake Grunden. Am I understanding right? You're threatening me—threatening to shoot me down without warning—in your own bar." And as their eyes clashed and both pair held, Black Jack added, "Under the conditions you lay down."

"I'm stating facts," Grunden told him. "I'm laying the facts before you, so that there is no misunderstanding. You repeat tonight's performance and I'll shoot you dead frontways, sideways or backwards—just deader than all hell. Is that clear?"

It was. Black Jack opened his mouth twice but no words came. He finally nodded his head and Grunden stuck the cigar back in his mouth, turned his back and walked past the bar and into his own room. No one spoke for a minute. But dozens of heads nodded in understanding just as Black Jack's head had nodded. I tell you, Jack Grunden was a surprising man.

Later, when I went to thank Grunden, he stopped me.

"I wasn't even thinking of you, Creepy," he told me. "I was thinking of my place, and myself, and my business. I don't lay to run any man's business—and I don't lay to let any

man run mine—leastwise not while both of us are alive."

And that was all that was ever said about that. If words passed between Black Jack and Grunden afterwards I didn't hear them—nor did I ever hear of them. Jake Grunden had spoke his piece; Black Jack McClain had listened to it. It seemed to be forgotten. Certainly Black Jack was back in the *Paradise Palace* two nights later; certainly Grunden treated him as he had always treated him. They laughed and joked together. Black Jack didn't seem to bear no grudge against me. As for me—I hated the man; and it was then that I planned to kill him.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, and I never heard a word from Slim Pete. Did I expect to? Well, I shouldn't, I suppose, but I did.

I didn't go to see Nancy any more. I understood. At first I didn't. I thought she didn't want me around. Tiny Bella—them girls heard about everything—said that Black Jack didn't want me there. And Nancy was afraid for my life.

"You ain't sweet on her, are you, Creepy? Not a kid like you?"

"Not me," I told her. "I feel sorry—well not for her, but about her."

"And you always liked Long Slim Pete. There, Creepy, don't look at me like that; we girls never talk. But we knew. Guys up here in the North don't hang on to ideals long—unless there's a woman. Men are blind—but we all knew about Pete. And we all wished she had him. Pete was a gentleman, Creepy. Even to us—bad women."

SHE AND the other girls used to throw in that "bad women" stuff with a little toss of their heads, and a laugh like they enjoyed the sound of it. But they didn't; even I knew that. I didn't want to talk to Tiny Bella but she pulled me over near her and sort of held me there and I saw a real sort of fear in her eyes.

"You're from New York, Creepy," she said. "You must of heard and seen

a lot; did you ever hear tell of a dead body turning over in its grave?"

"I heard about it," I said, "but I never took much stock in it. They say it in a joke like."

"Creepy." She leaned very close to me now. "Why do you suppose Black Jack McClain would—would want to move Harry Horton's body? Move it someplace else. Would it haunt him?"

"Whatever are you talking about? Dead people don't haunt—" And not being too sure, and not wanting to get in bad with the dead if there was anything to it, I said, "Leastwise, I don't think they do without a reason."

And then I choked. I knew the reason. A dead man might want to haunt Black Jack. And suddenly I was afraid too. Then I wasn't. It wouldn't be my funeral. Still—it might come asking me and—and— I laughed; it was silly.

"Who's moving whose body?" I tried to make my voice light.

"Black Jack. No, he didn't tell me; but Dago Fred got paid for the job and the men with him were Black Jack's men. They opened up the grave last week. At night, Creepy. And—Dago Fred helped Sad Sam lay him out—and seen him when the coffin lid was screwed down and—"

"And what—and what?"

She shushed me then though I didn't think I had spoken so loud.

"Well Harry Horton was laid out on his back. Fitted in tight on his back. Dago Fred was in a blue funk, Creepy. He seen the lid screwed down—and it come off in his hands up there the other night—and—Creepy—Harry Horton was lying on his face. Lying on his face—hear that?"

"And his back—his back," I said. "What was wrong with his back?"

"Why nothing was wrong with his back." Bella was surprised. "Why should there be? Anyway, Dago Fred saw enough. He didn't tell the others; he let them move the body. He wouldn't have no further part in it."

"Did he tell Black Jack?"

"He didn't tell no one, Creepy. Only me. He had to tell someone; he had to tell. It was eating his heart out and driving him half mad. We girls hear a lot. We never talk, Creepy. Oh, like to you—like this maybe. You won't say nothing, Creepy. But what should I do?"

"Why? What can you do? What do you want to do?"

"I don't want nothing to do with a man that seen the dead turn over in their grave. It ain't natural, Creepy—but the other girls. Should I—shouldn't they know? He froze me stiff, did Dago Fred. What about the others? Is it right not to tell them? And if I do, and they don't believe me, and—Creepy, I'm scared."

"What they don't know won't hurt them. Can't hurt them. Don't tell them, Bella." And seeing the relief in her face. "I got that pretty straight from a dead-raiser back on the Bowery."

"Yes." She was all right now. "They should know, I guess, Creepy." And sudden like, "What's a dead-raiser?"

I WAS STUMPED for a second for I had simply made it up to spar for time and help Bella and not lose my standing with her. For I blew a bit on what we knew back on the Bowery. Then it hit me.

"Why a dead-raiser is one who raises the dead," I said easily.

"Sure, Creepy," she smiled, and it was good to see her smile. "Of course that's it— I'm stupid, Creepy. You know a lot, Creepy; you put my mind at ease."

She wanted to give me some money then, but I wouldn't take it. Had I lied to her? Well maybe not. When I got to thinking it over, a dead-raiser *would* be one who raised the dead at that. And if you leave things alone alive you don't get into trouble. Why wouldn't it be the same with the dead?

I left her then, but I didn't sleep so well that night. Dead bodies don't turn over in their coffins—and if they do they don't turn without reason. Harry Horton had reason enough. Should I tell Grunden? And my answer was no; if Black Jack putting a bullet in the back of Harry Horton wasn't his business—after Harry Horton was buried it wasn't none of Jake Grunden's business either.

Whose business was it then that Harry Horton turned over in his grave? And the logical answer made me a little sick. It was Harry Horton's business—of course!

6

NANCY HORTON seemed to agree to the wedding. From what the girls around *Paradise Palace* said, she didn't seem to have much choice. There wasn't a chance of her getting out without money—and few who'd cross Black Jack. And I guess those few didn't know enough about Nancy.

Most of them said this for Black Jack. That he had courted her fair and honest—and what would have become of her if he didn't marry her?

Nancy did a lot of crying from what

I heard—and finally I decided to go up and see her. I had a plan. Big Ben Bartley had tossed himself up a bit of a shed not too far from where Nancy lived—if you call it living. You could get in and out it without much trouble, and there was some fair-sized cracks in it—just in the right place. I wasn't guessing about that. I had been inside of it; stuck my rifle through one of the cracks and drawn a bead on Black Jack more than once. It looked like a sure thing. I'm no fancy shot, understand. But on a moonlight night I couldn't have missed him—no, not if you were to throw snow in my face at the time.

I could still feel that kick in the stomach. That's right. Six months later I could feel it when I set my mind to it. Personally I couldn't see much harm in shooting him; I'd be that hand of vengeance, shooting for Nancy and Pete. And now, thinking of that kick, for myself too. Afterwards—I don't think anyone would care much.

Even Jake Grunden would have seen that, if I put it to him, I suspect. If Nancy wasn't my business; if Pete wasn't my business—surely the kick in the stomach was my business. Just as much, even more than it was Jake Grunden's.

First, I wanted to see how Nancy felt about it. Women are funny creatures—and maybe, after all, she didn't mind marrying Jack McClain. Certainly he had money. Maybe he didn't have any claim you could lay a finger to, but he sold them and traded them off so fast no one knew where he stood. Except, he made money—a lot of money.

I made my call on Nancy Horton of a bleak windswept Wednesday morning about two o'clock. Her cabin hadn't any windows, but it was firm and hard with two doors. For if Harry Horton knew nothing else he had been a carpenter by trade, and the logs were tough and firm and laid in place like they had grown that way.

I did it with a scraping at the door and a flat piece of paper with the words printed on it. "No light—silence—Georgie."

There was a light but it was doused fast. She pulled back the heavy wooden bar and let me in. The fire was going and she hadn't been to bed. I had seen her a couple of times at the store but not in a month and I was surprised how good she looked. Surprised and shocked.

"Georgie," she pulled me in by the fire, "you got a message for me?"

How she knew that, I don't know; I had a message for her, all right, though I didn't know how she'd take it. She looked well; she looked happy. She looked better than the first time I ever set eyes on her. Younger too.

"It's about—about your marriage next week. I come to tell you, it don't—it isn't coming off—Nancy."

"Yes, yes—" She put an arm around my shoulder. "You know that, Georgie." And with a bit of alarm in her voice. "I hope and pray that; I believe that." Then she flung her arms around me and started to cry. "Oh, Georgie," she said, "Black Jack will kill him. He can't. He mustn't face him."

"Who," I demanded, "is going to face Black Jack? Listen, Nancy. Listen. Don't go on like that. Black Jack is going to die like he killed—through the—" I stopped. It struck me she didn't know about that. So I put it different. I said, "You don't have to worry about Black Jack; he'll get it through the back."

"No, no," she cried. "It can't be like that. Not him—not Pete. If it was in him to shoot a man in the back, Black Jack would be dead now. Oh, Georgie—Black Jack will kill him; Pete will face him."

I PUSHED her from me and straightened her up a bit for I'm a pretty strong kid and she was only a slip of a woman. I wondered what she was talking about—and if her head was right. But I said rather patient like.

"Pete ain't here. I'm not talking about Pete. I—"

"Pete didn't send you?" she said and she looked scared.

"No," I said. "Pete had to go places, I guess. If he knew he'd come. It's me, Nancy. I don't aim to be no fancy hero and draw on Black Jack." And then it just came out. "I was sort of thinking of plugging him through the head some dark night. He kicked me in the stomach, and—"

"Georgie—Georgie." She had her arms around me again. "I didn't know I had a friend. That sort of a friend. No, Georgie. I'd rather marry Black Jack a thousand times over than have you— It would be murder, Georgie."

"Not up here, it wouldn't," I told her. "It's done over and over, and if there's trouble I won't mention your name. I can't see you—can't— You don't love him, Nancy. You couldn't."

"No—no," she said slowly. "And I'm not going to marry him, Georgie." And her cheeks took on red and her eyes shone. "At least, I don't think I am. But you are not to do anything. Georgie—anything at all. Promise me that."

She talked a lot, then. She said men watched the shack, off and on, and I was to go—and not worry. Then she'd laugh, and then she'd cry, and she had me that rattled I didn't know where I was.

I couldn't nohow see murder in the killing of Black Jack. This wasn't New York; up here it was different. Bad blood was bad blood. Unless you put miles between that sort of blood, you killed or were killed.

Sure, people died who shouldn't—but plenty died that should. I was thinking that, two nights later, when I drifted down by Olaf the Swede's place early in the evening.

Olaf the Swede was a real lone man. He talked funny—that is if you got him to talk at all. He had a cabin, a good bit down from the *Paradise Palace,* and people let him alone. He said he was a nervous man; he was quick on the trigger, anyway. He just naturally shot at people who hung around his place and he just naturally hit what he shot at. He didn't believe in quick gold. He earned his money. He'd run you in or out of Blue Blazes even in a raging blizzard if you paid enough for it. And what's more he always got through. The men naturally let him alone; he had no use for women.

He didn't mind me. I used to go down and talk to him a bit. Not dark nights though—but when he could see me coming and recognize me, as I waved like a scarecrow.

I guess now I came at a bad time. Anyway I was pretty close to the cabin when I saw the men. The two men. The long slim one jerked erect and stood looking at me. The smaller figure was bending over and it might have been Olaf, though I found out different quick enough.

THE TALL figure turned and ducked into the house. It was a familiar figure, I thought. The smaller figure straightened and started toward me. I held my ground. He wasn't carrying a rifle and when he got close to me I saw the heavy revolver swinging loose, hanging almost center of him. An odd place, that; most of the boys swung guns low all right—but they were well over to the left where they could make a cross-grab for them. Despite all the stories that come

to you in the East—few of the men are two-gun men. Black Jack was one of those few. A man has all he can do to draw on a kill with one hand; Black Jack worked two.

The moon came out suddenly, and I wasn't scared any more. Why this man wasn't much more than a boy. He was thin with a jerky walk and his eyes were snappy and bright like Nancy's.

"Come on, kid," he hollered at me. "Scat—" And damned if he didn't lean down and roll a snowball and let it go at me—not only let it go at me but caught me right in the face with it. A good throw considering the distance.

That was my meat. I wasn't mad; I rather liked it. I was pretty good with snowballs, not having any competition but the girls occasionally up at the *Paradise Palace Saloon.* So I thought I'd let him see something. But I was wrong. He must have been a city kid. He was older than I thought, but he acted like a kid—and he just about smothered me with snowballs—and then he said:

"Scoot, kid. I hear Olaf. Scoot, boy. We'll finish our battle another time." Sounds silly, maybe. It was odd for the North, but I liked it. Life was too serious. More serious than death, even.

I went along. If Olaf didn't want company, I didn't want any part of Olaf. I was wondering about the familiar figure who ducked into the Swede's cabin—and, yes, the unfamiliar figure of the youth who didn't know how to wear his gun—but had such a nice laugh, and wasn't too old to rough it up a bit in the snow.

The next night this little incident was more than a little incident. I found out who the familiar figure was. I should have known then but I didn't—because there was no reason to know.

Anyway it was Black Jack McClain who announced it at the *Paradise Palace Bar.* He announced it loud and plenty. It was on a Monday night—the same afternoon that he had a real parson brought up from White Cove. Him and Nancy were to be hitched on Saturday. And Black Jack was doing things right and taking no chance on delay.

He was in a good mood too and he waved the sheet of paper in his hand.

"It's the parson," he said, "who is supposed to ask if anyone has any objection why these two—meaning me and Nancy—shouldn't be joined up in holy matrimony. I say, Jake, have you got any objections to a bit of killing here at your bar?"

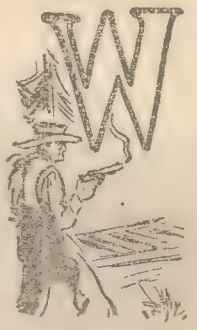
"You know the rules," was all Grunden said as he went on handing out the liquor.

"Well," Black Jack said, "listen to this. I'll read it to you." He did too, spreading it out on the bar under a hanging oil lamp, in a loud slow voice for he wasn't much on reading.

"Black Jack McClain," he fairly bellowed it. *"If you are still at Blue Blazes on Friday night...just when the clock strikes twelve...and still harboring delusions that you are going to marry Nancy Horton...then I aim to hunt you down wherever you may try to hide and shoot you dead on sight.*

Slim Pete Holt."

7



WHAT STRUCK me strangest at the time was that, up to that moment, I had never heard Pete's last name.

Black Jack wasn't scared. Not one bit was he scared. I went back and spoke to Grunden about it. He always liked Pete.

"Pete's a fool," Grunden said. "Anyone who knows Pete knows he never draws on a man first. And of course he'd never shoot a man down from behind. I guess he was soft on Nancy—but she was a married woman. Now what he'll accomplish by dying for her—"

"Ain't he got a chance?"

"No." Grunden was emphatic. "Pete's smart, and Pete's fast; but Black Jack is chain-lightning. Do you know, Creepy, Black Jack could put a few of his shots into that five-spot—and still kill Pete. It's suicide."

"But Black Jack will be here at the bar. And you—"

"I won't be here," Grunden said. "I got business just before twelve, until just after twelve." And with a sigh. "I like Pete; I like him like a brother. Somehow he thinks this is dying like a gentleman." And the disgust going out of his voice and a sort of awe coming in, "Maybe it is, Creepy; I never have known Pete to be wrong."

I'm supposed to be smart. Being city-bred, maybe I'm supposed to be smart. And maybe I am smart where so many people are unsmart. Things fell into place now. I knew what Nancy meant about Pete—and that she had heard from him. And I knew what was familiar about the long slim figure down by Olaf's a couple of nights back. I knew it was Long Slim Pete Holt. I knew, too, that he was going to die—unless I did something about it. I knew, too, that I was going to do something about it. Though I didn't know then what I was going to do. But I did do something. Yes, I did something. I did just enough to kill Black Jack McClain—as Grunden said—deader than all hell.

I killed him with silence.

Funny about Jake Grunden, wasn't it? You'd think it was his business to see that no shooting took place at his bar. He couldn't be doing it for Black Jack; it must be for Slim Pete then—and I gagged over that one. I thought it was playing friendship a little too far—to let a pal die—even if he was dying like a gentleman.

Black Jack went about arrangements for the wedding. Everything was paid for. Friday night and Saturday—during, before, and after the wedding, the drinks were on Black Jack McClain; he had paid a flat sum for it. Jake Grunden figuring out what he thought the consumption per man would be and charging accordingly—and Black Jack being satisfied and claiming Jake would lose money on the deal. Anyway, the boys were aiming to see that Grunden didn't make money.

Sure, the wedding would be at the *Paradise Palace Saloon*. Where else? Weddings, funerals—and the only revival-meeting we ever had were held there.

Everyone knew about the wedding. Lads were coming up from down river as far as Pine Bluff. Friday night was a big night. Word got around. While the boys liked Slim Pete, it is just natural to want to be in at a killing. Me—Sure, I knew that Pete wouldn't have a chance. Yet I wouldn't have missed being there if my life depended on it. Not that I wanted to see Pete go out. It was something I had to do; it pulled me like I was on the end of a chain and a dozen horses dragging at the other end.

FRIDAY night come mighty fast. Black Jack was tossing the drinks around. There wasn't a moment when you didn't see him with a glass in his hand—and hardly another moment when he wasn't having it filled up. But I knew, and the bartenders knew; Black Jack was hardly drinking anything. It all went in the spittoons, or in some drunks' glass at the tables. The drunks not caring—you bet.

The girls laid low. It was remarkable how many of the heavy drinkers near turned teetotalers. Things didn't happen often like this. A guy coming gunning and on the kill; and a guy waiting betting he couldn't make good. Just gamble. The greatest gamble of all. You bet your life.

No one mentioned it out loud. But the glances at Black Jack and toward the door, though it was not yet eleven, let you know what was on the men's minds. Only the soaks didn't care. The liquor was good; it was free and they liked it. Sure, they knew there wasn't a man could draw clean and get Black

Jack—but accidents would happen, and they were scared the drinks might dry up if Black Jack was dead.

Then I saw the wiry skinny lad—my friend of the snowball fight. No, it wasn't funny I hadn't seen him come in; I hadn't been thinking about him. I was busy filling up the glasses; handing out bottles. Of course it wasn't funny he was there either. Everyone and his brother was there; the place was packed.

At eleven o'clock, every table was taken and lads were leaning up against the wall; the dance hall was so packed no one could dance—and the piano was playing pretty rickety. By eleven-thirty, it was jammed worse. People pushed away from the bar—for Pete and Black Jack being expert shots, few of the boys figured on being between them when the fireworks began.

The young guy I had seen down at Olaf's was leaning against the bar, his right hand draped over it, his left hand hanging at his side sort of loose like as if he had hurt it. It didn't seem to move much; and there was his gun hanging low and too far center.

Black Jack's two guns hung right. I seen him shift them several times. The slim guy never bothered about his, but then neither did most of the men around. It wasn't their funeral—or their killing.

At the end of the bar nearest the door was Toad Johnston. I seen him move his gun plenty—heiting the weight of it—nervous-like or anxious-like. At eleven-fifty almost to the minute Black Jack did it. He raised his hand for silence and spoke.

"Boys," he said, "I got ten minutes of my time to give to any one of you who wants it. You all know about Long Slim Pete—the skunk what run out because he didn't think I liked a lying remark he made. Now he's coming here at twelve—objecting to my wedding—wanting to try a little shooting—inviting me to draw on him." Black Jack grinned then and said, "Oh, I'll oblige him. I'm a fair minded man. Now—before I shoot him dead for you—is there anyone else who don't like this wedding of mine? The time to speak up is now. Anyone at all?"

"Now," the slim youth turned and looked at Black Jack. "I take what you said, sir, as a right fine gesture, coming from a man with a face what has no character in it—no good in it. I'm a stranger; I'd like to know who's marrying you—and before God, why!"

8

THE SMILE went off Black Jack's face. He looked at the stranger like he was going to strike him dead. Steady eyes looked back at him. Black Jack sucked in his breath. Then I guess he figured that the stranger was drunk. He said: "Nancy Horton, widow of Harry Horton—" His face shot forward. "Like it?"

The stranger looked puzzled, but his right hand never left the bar; Black Jack's eyes took in both his face and his right hand.

"No," the stranger said. "I don't like it. I knew Harry Horton. He was a preaching, hard-working rabbit-sort of a man. But he married a fine woman I understand. Yes, sir. I object to her exchanging a rabbit for a dirty, yellow-livered skunk that shoots men in the back." Then he up with the beer mug, filled his mouth with it and shot it back out of his mouth into Black Jack's flaming red face and redder eyeballs. All he said then was: "Draw on that?"

There was a dead silence in that room. A stillness never before experienced in the *Paradise Palace Saloon.* But Black Jack held his head. He spoke clear and firm and mad—but he spoke his piece. "I'm drawing for the

kill," he said, and his right hand shot over and went for his gun.

Chain-lightning Black Jack was; I never saw a hand move faster. And the youth stood there with his right arm draped over the bar. I guess I never saw a hand move faster than Black Jack's, because I never saw the youth's hand move. But I did hear the roar of the gun; I did see the streak of yellow blue flame; I did see the tiny hole that appeared in Black Jack's forehead. And I did see Black Jack go down. Saw him slump slowly to the floor with his gun—well the nose of it was not quite out of its holster.

Things happened even faster after that. Toad Johnston at the end of the bar pulled out his gun. The front doors swung open, and Long Slim Pete Holt walked into the saloon; he dropped the Toad like he was a log.

The young fellow at the bar turned and smelled the gun still clutched in his left hand. Then he said: "Gentlemen, is there anyone else that don't like what goes on here tonight."

And when no one spoke. "Good. The wedding is paid for; the drinks are bought; the groom is dead. Another has come to take his place. You all know Long Slim Pete. I talked to Nancy Horton tonight—less than an hour ago. She's a downright obliging woman; she not only agreed but welcomed the change. She's my sister-in-law. That's right, boys. Harry Horton didn't think much of me—and maybe I didn't think too much of him. But he was my brother. Maybe you didn't know this. But Olaf and Pete and me dug up Harry the other night—and found a hole in his back. Black Jack McClain's lead; the dead skunk lying there. How's it to toss him out in the snow—where the other wolves can get at him."

I KNEW then; at least, I thought I knew then. But Jake Grunden told me for sure a few hours later when I was worrying about the death of Black Jack, and the part I took in it. Grunden said: "Sure—he's The Wolf, Creepy. I told you Black Jack wouldn't get his gun fully out of his holster. No, I didn't know it would pan out like that—but I knew he was Harry Horton's brother and would naturally want first shot at his murderer. Now, what's this you're moping about—having a hand in the killing of Black Jack? I know you were thinking of killing him—but you didn't."

"Well, I don't know," I said to Jake Grunden. I wasn't sure. I never had killed a man, and it was in my heart to kill Black Jack—and it was in my mind—and worst of all in my silence.

"It's like this, Jake." I finally got it out. "I saw The Wolf before—and he chucked snowballs at me—and he—well, I seen plainly that he was left-handed."

"What of it?" Grunden said. "He shot him dead with his left hand, didn't he?"

"Yeah, that's it. One gun—swung toward the middle—for a two-gun man. A bit tricky, and Black Jack watching that right hand. Now—if I had spoke up—Black Jack wouldn't be dead—" And when Grunden's eyes widened, "He'd of seen the trap—realized it wasn't a—"

"Creepy," Jake laid a hand kindly on my shoulder. "You don't know The Wolf. If Black Jack hadn't drawn, The Wolf would have gun-whipped him and branded him a yellow coward up and down the North—and 'Frisco too. You did Black Jack a favor."

"That's the trouble, too." I frowned. "He kicked me in the belly; I didn't want to do Black Jack no favor."

So that's how it stood. It was a grand wedding—and Jake Grunden lost money on the deal. What's more, I had never seen a man more happy over losing money either.

Tiny Bella and Dago Fred were friends again and I never saw two people more relieved when they found out the corpse hadn't turned over by his own self.

★

"Have a drink, Digger," Dredger Dan said. "It'll be the *last* drink yew get from here — an' it' be the last credit yew've been gettin' from me. . . . To of that, I'm callin' in all yore loans. Every note yew owe for powder, iron-pipe, tools, monitors, an' even hay for yore burros — understand, Digger John? . . . Top of that, Digger John, I'm joinin' the English Company to break yew. 'Fore we're finished, yew won't have a patch to reseat yore ragged pants with! Yew won't have a hobnail to hob yore boots, an' yew won't have enough minin'-water to keep a gila monster from dyin' of thirst. Understand?"

Digger John - Kidnapper

by A. A. BAKER

AN EARLY morning fleece-cloud drifted over the mountains. It had held the sun off the dewed manzanita brush, but now the sun reared up over Cold Spring Mountain and steamed the dampness from the mildewing pine-needles. The heat brought steam from the sweating back of the big man, drilling auger holes in the dead stumps studding the streets of Gold Run. While the belligerent sun was a gleaming hot eye in the blue sky, the rest of the terrain was a peaceful, drowsing spot; the squeal of the auger the only sound on the streets of the mountain town.

Digger John leaned the long-handled auger against the stump. Moisture had seeped through the tattered snake band of his floppy black hat. With a damp hand he scratched the black hair on his chest, then tucked the red undershirt firmly into his belt. A warm breeze nodded its way down from the mountain.

It was a hot, lazy afternoon. The buildings seemed entirely deserted as Digger hoisted the black powder-can. He listened to the song of a bottle-fly as he poured the gritty powder deep into the hole he had bored in the stump. With a broom-handle, he tamped the powder then plugged it with a fistful of red clay. He strung the fuse by kicking a two-foot section of log ahead of him; joining the fuse with a dozen others that snaked their way from twelve other stumps, to the front of Dredger's *Hotel and Saloon.*

Digger John stood back and surveyed his work. The stumps were a nuisance; rearing up just a few feet from the ground, they were a menace to man and beast. Years before, Gold Run had been built in a hurry, on the hectic whisper of gold; the trees had been hacked off and left to rot. That morning, Digger had decided the stumps should be removed and had worked through the day, preparing his blasting. It was ready now and he clumped toward the pull-rope of the fire-bell tower, lighting a Chinese match and setting the long fuse afire as he passed Dredger's saloon.

"—and we'll get all the water—" the words carried on a shout through the batwings of the saloon as Digger

Dredger Dan went straight up.

passed. The stump-blaster paused, then stuck his head over the top of the doors to survey the drinkers.

An Englishman, tweed coat matching the hat with a red feather raising a thumb length along the felt, had moved a step back from the bar and was repeating. "We'll get the water. Water-rights belong to those who can control them, *not* to just any dallying miner with a spot of a hydraulic mine!"

"Dunno 'bout that," began the stout bar-owner. Dredger Dan had seen Digger John's cold blue eyes peeping over the batwings.

"Yeah..." Digger ruffled his way into the barroom. "The man's partly right. Miner's Law says the man at the head of the water can use what *he* needs first. My claim's above the London Surface Mine an'..."

"We're handling that!" snapped the Englishman, barely moving the tight lips under a Bismarck mustache.

"Mr. Harley says he's handling that," repeated Dredger Dan and gave Digger a hard stare.

"*Dang* this water-right argument!" growled the red shirted miner. He paused, and dislike of Harley threaded his question. "Why'n hell don't you open your mouth when you talk?" As Harley's face reddened he continued. "Everytime I get around these Englishmen, they's a big row about hydraulic water. They's enough water for each— The London Mine an' my little claim on the rim of The London."

"Harley says—he's gonna have *all* the water." Dredger gave the needle another jab and moved back to enjoy the argument.

SINCE THE English company had invested in the hydraulic diggings, the water claim had been a long-drawn issue. Gold Run's ditch-company had split; the co-partners, formerly united to work their separate claims, now disbanded. Some sold out ditch stock, ore beds and patented

rights, to the big foreign combine.

Digger John was the exception. His claim sat on a ridge above the London Surface Mine, and Digger sat just as firmly on retaining his Cedar Creek Ravine rights to the water he needed. Harley had offered a fabulous price, but the obstinate forty-niner had told him to take his offer, his company, and go to hell.

"By gawd, I forgot!" suddenly roared Digger and ran for the back door of the saloon. The clap of powder-explosions followed his running feet; blasts thudded over the mountains like cannons in a rainstorm, with a drunken cannoneer. The batwings were smashed by a thudding chunk of stump-root the size of a wagon-tongue. It careened into the room and knocked the stovepipe from the round stove, then whipped across the bar and embedded its quivering length into the back mirror.

Digger hurried back into the room and moaned. "Forgot to warn the folks of the explosion. Twelve stumps went up an' the pieces is comin' down like Joe Monte's barn when his still went through the roof. Did'ja count the shots, Dredger? Was they twelve?"

"Count the shots!" shrieked the voice behind the bar. "Look'it my mirror—an' start countin' *these* shots!" He rose and aimed a harsh eye along the barrel of his shotgun; the first shot blared out but Digger had hustled through the broken batwings and was running down the street.

"Stay inside..." his voice was a pleading roar. "Stay out'a the street till I check the stumps!"

Citizens boiled out of the buildings and dashed around in the dusty, graveled street. From lower Main Street, Miners stumbled out and hurried toward the firehouse. In the confusion, Digger's warnings were ignored and a buzz of excited questions followed the running man. The gunfire from Dredger's sawed-off gun, added its disturbance as he rushed out across the boardwalk and searched for Digger John.

Dredger spotted the black hat and with the agility of a fat nannygoat, hopped onto a stump and drew a bead. He cocked the hammer and a smile started to spread across his rosy cheeks. He moved the black barrels to lead the running man. His fingers slowly pressed on the trigger. The smell of burning powder reached the hotel man's nostrils just before the stump blew up.

The shotgun bounced, its slugs kicking it against the clapboard walls of the hotel. Dredger's body rose straight up, for several feet, then was hurtled onto the dusty street. His white apron was blackened and the back of his bright blue vest was afire with burning bits of rotten wood. He rolled over, then, with a look of resigned repugnance, clambered into the tepid water of the horse-trough. The fire sizzled out and a hard expression spread across the hotel man's face.

SEVERAL hours later, Digger John found out what that hard expression portended. The saloon was filled; talk of the stump-explosion was still bubbling mirthfully among the drinkers. Digger had trudged back from his hide-out on Cold Spring Mountain.

Dredger Dan wore a clean apron and a checkered vest. The set look still hardened his chunky face. "Digger?" the words were deceptively soft. "Have a drink?"

"Why, shore, Dredger. Thankee very much. Never meant yew should be blowed up; got sidetracked by the Englishman's talk about water, an' forgot about them loaded stumps..."

"It'll be the *last* drink—"-continued Dredger completely ignoring the muttered apology— "yew get from here—an' it'll be the last of the credit yew've been gettin' from me. Understand?" His voice was studied, rising in volume as he went on. "Top of that, I'm

callin' in all yore loans. Every note yew owe for powder, iron-pipe, tools, monitors, an' even the hay for yore burros—understand, Digger John?" Digger opened his mouth, noted Dredger wasn't finished and gulped his drink.

"Top of that, Digger John, I'm joinin' the English Company to break yew! 'Fore we're finished, yew won't have a patch to reseat yore ragged pants with! Yew won't have a hobnail to hob yore boots, an' yew won't have enough minin'-water to keep a gila monster from dyin' of thirst! Unstand?"

"Shore, Dredger. Now, let's have another drink. This time, one for the house—just add it to my bill."

"Gawd A'mighty!" howled Dredger, "didn't yew *hear* what I jest said?"

"Shore did," Digger acknowledged. "I hear yew, but yew cut me off before. Yew always done it sudden *an'* poked that sawed-off gun while yew was doin' it..."

Dredger fumbled under the bar and the twin muzzles peered over the polished wood. Digger John shrugged coldly and stomped from the saloon.

●

Four days later, Digger's monitor-crew quit. "Harley's payin' wages in cash," the spokesman explained. "The English Company is buildin' a reservoir in that hollow."

He pointed to the bushy swale below the west side of Cold Spring. "Says there'll be work the year round. This old equipment you got, Digger, is fallin' apart. That Fisher's Knuckle Joint is helt together with California buckskin, and won't last another week. We're hirin' with the Englishman 'fore he gets in another shipment of them Welshmen."

Digger stared at the wire-wrapped pipe and the scarred nozzle and retorted. "Yew're bein' paid shares here; that can mean a lot more'n wages. The snow-water's startin' to melt around Bear Valley an' we'll have us lots of water in a day or so..."

"Man can't feed the family on hopes and—the London's tappin' Cedar Creek above you." The monitor-man ducked his head, and Digger watched him and his crew move off. He stared at his pit and the glistening gravel winked in the hot sun.

THAT NIGHT, as Digger moved up Main Street, the citizens avoided his grim form. He paused in front of the hotel and stared at the white, handprinted bulletin on the hotel billboard. *"Let it be known..."* Digger fumbled the words slowly between his tongue and cheek, then grabbed a passerby by the shirt and swung him in front of the notice.

"Read that for me!" he aimed a thick-finger at the paper.

"It says—" the man hesitated and tried to draw away. "It says, anybody working for the Digger Hydraulic Mine, will be denied credit in the hotel and at the merchandise stores of Gold Run. It's signed by every storekeep and saloonkeeper in town." Digger released his hold on the shirt and the man slipped away.

Whacking the batwings, Digger entered the buzzing saloon. A score of faces turned toward the doors; several men moved to the stairs, while others sidled toward the windows. The citizens had seen the big miner in a rage before, and found it a more enjoyable fight if a witness had a way out when the big man exploded.

At a corner table, five stocky, short-coated men rose to their feet and flexed their shoulders. They winked, grinned a little to spike their courage, and moved toward the front of the room.

"You Digger John?" The spitting question came from the heavy-faced man. The speaker held his arms bunched and the muscles were hard against the rough coat.

"Yeah." Digger grinned broadly.

"Why? Somebody tell yew to buy me a drink?"

"You been takin' cuts at the men from the London Mine," was the reply. "We come to ask why?"

"Well, now, maybe I have." Digger hooked his boot-toe behind a cuspidor. "What I said was...every Englishman talked with his mouth closed. Like *yew* just done. Harley wears a mustache an' yew can't tell if he's talkin', or if the noise is comin' outa his ears." The miner hooked his elbow into the brass rail that ran waist high and leaned back. "S'matter, 'fraid yore buck-teeth'll fall out?"

"It's your teeth that'll be coming out!" was the thin lipped rejoiner as the five men moved forward. The chunky speaker aimed a blackhaired fist at Digger's face.

Digger let out a hoot and ducked; his toe shot the cuspidor between the legs of the advancing men. Leaning back, until his shoulder touched the smooth bar-surface, Digger kicked two of his attackers flush in the face. He came down unhooked his arms from the bar and wrenched the brass railing loose. It became a four-foot section of flailing club and caught the light of the overhead lamps as he whacked every head that came close. The five men dodged around him like a pack of dogs about a grizzly bear. Digger took a blow on the forehead that rocked him away from the bar, then they were on him. Digger crashed to the floor and rolled in the sawdust like a porcupine in a barrel of molasses. The attackers stamped boots into his rolling body until he scrambled under a roulette table.

The crowd roared approval. "Take 'em on, Digger! That's the way—bust their hard heads, Digger!"

SPECTATORS were backed out the door and up the stairs. Several clambered onto the bar, where the barkeeper banged at their feet with a bungstarter. The saloon was a full box of noise as Digger John climbed to his feet, behind the upended table, with its wheel still spinning. His face was bloody and his red shirt split across the back, but his fighting grin re-appeared as he wiped an arm across his bloody mouth.

Digger's opponents were still on their feet and, though battered, moved in a rush toward his table. The miner suddenly reached out and hooked a man by the belt. He yanked him forward and raised the protesting body over his head. The man screamed as he was hurled at the stove. Like a man-sized cat, the man twisted in midair and clawed out for something to break his fall. The blackened stovepipe was the only thing to grasp. He wrapped his arms around the stovepipe and brought pipe, the wires holding it to the ceiling, and the stove down in a mass of soot and tin. The soft, inky soot, drifted about the room and roiled upwards as the body hit the floor.

The spectators fought to get out the doorway. The first man stumbled over the upended spittoon and crashed; the men behind, fell over him and piled up like flies on flypaper against the broken batwings. The people outside, trying to get a look into the saloon, were bowled over by the strugglers seeking escape from the soot-filled room. Over the noise and the swearing could be heard the wild keening of Dredger Dan as he surveyed the spattered wreckage of his establishment. A length of stove pipe dangled and swayed from the ceiling, laying a haze of soft soot, until the yellow sawdust was a trampled black mass. The room emptied, Dredger Dan climbed off the bar, and began moving aimlessly around the room; wiping the oily black stuff off the tables with a wet rag.

"What I come for—" the words shocked the bar-owner and he turned to stare at Digger John who was leaning against the far end of the bar, uncorking a bottle of whiskey. "What I come for—" he repeated— "was

to ask yew why yew cut off credit to my miners?" He raised a quizzical eyebrow and drained his drink.

" 'Cause—" snapped the hotel-man, throwing the streaked bar towel into a corner— " 'Cause this is why!" Dredger flung his arms about, pointing out the damage. "Every time somethin' happens, it's like this. Trouble an' damage—an' always to me!"

"Then why'nt yew get on my side, steada on the side of them Englishmen?" Digger's tone was sincerely questioning.

"The only time I'll be on your side," snapped Dredger Dan, "is when we walk you up Cemetery Hill. I'll carry twict my share of yore weight—as a pallbearer. Now, get outa here!"

"Just a min-ute," growled Digger. "Yew never answered my question. Why'd yew cut off the supplies?"

" 'Cause I got my money sunk in the London Claim!" shouted Dredger. " 'Cause they're sinkin' improvements into this London Mine. Buildin' a reservoir. Givin' men steady employment an'—'cause yew're a headache to the entire country! Yew're the only holdout, but we'll run yew off after the celebration."

"What celebration?"

"For the openin' of the reservoir. When we can start pourin' the water. We'll have a four hunnert foot drop through a fifteen-inch pipe, reducin' into a three inch monitor nozzle, that'll move boulders as big as this room. With sixteen-thousand miners' inches of water, we'll set up a whole battery of monitors against that face!

"We got the President of The London Company comin' all the way from England. He'll give a speech, an' open the first valve on the flume leadin' from the reservoir." Dredger's chest swelled with pride.

"What about my water rights...?" began Digger John.

"We're cuttin' into the ravine above yew," sneered Dredger Dan. "Yew'll get a trickle—but that's all."

"Why, yew said before," growled the miner, "that that fella couldn't use all the water."

"That's before we figured how to dam it off at Cedar Creek an' bypass yore place," chuckled Dredger. "Now, it don't matter, 'cause yew'll be outa business onct the reservoir fills up. We'll suck the ravine dry 'fore it ever gets to yew. That Harley's a smart engineer..." he mimicked Digger's heavy voice... "even if he talks with his mouth closed."

"But I ain't got but a hunnert foot claim!" Digger paused then again started slowly. "I ain't got but..." He moved away from the bar and to the center of the littered room. A thoughtful frown gathered around his eyes and little wrinkles pinched his stubbled face together.

"What'd yew say?" Dredger demanded. "Yew ain't got but *what?*" A note of pleading entered the fat man's voice. He had been the victim of too many of Digger's wild ideas, and had the feeling that one of those schemes was developing now, behind the grin working over the miner's face. "Aw, hell, Dig—come on—what was yew sayin'? Have a drink, Dig, an' let's talk it out. The London Company'll buy yew out still, an'..."

"Thanks, Dredger." Digger stepped over the broken bar rail, touched the spittoon with a foot, until the belled bowl gurgled, and stepped through the splintered b a t w i n g s. Dredger Dan watched him go then stared hopelessly at his shattered saloon. "If five of them couldn't whip him," he muttered, "what chance has Gold Run got?" He was sorry now, he hadn't told Harley to send him twelve—and each of the twelve armed with two pistols.

THE LONDON Mining Company rushed the construction of the reservoir. Long miles of flume were dropped from the head of Cedar Creek Ravine. Digger watched the creek bed dry up as the water rushed through the four foot boxes. Digger's monitor dried up with the ravine; his source

of water was gone, as were his workmen. The London Company was paying four dollars a day, and their workers had the right of trade in the stores and saloons of Gold Run. His hundred foot claim was a dry hole of powdery gravel and dry sand. His sluice boxes cracked in the hot sun. The undercurrent riffles, so desperately needed to catch the fine gold, became rusty skeletons of iron, that sagged forlornly under their own weight.

The gold was there, but without water, Digger's hydraulic mine was a dead weight of accummulated debt. Gold, owed to Dredger for supplies, was buried in the gravel; and, without water, it would lay another million years, in the clutch of time.

Digger John sat morose on a white-speckled boulder and surveyed his claim. He heard a rustle and watched the bug eyes of a horned toad staring from the sandy desert. The scaly skin moved with its panting breath. Digger John rose, snapping sympathetically.

"Well, Mister Horny Toad, there ain't a drink of water here now—but stick around. Just stick around till the day of the celebration. Then there'll be water enough to drown a bullfrog." He climbed the hundred-foot bank, leaving a trail of dust, and followed the dripping flume toward the London Reservoir.

The heavy water-box that clung to the side of the mountain, rushed water to the reservoir. It was completed, but added shoulders were being dyked up by teams of mules and scrapers, even as the flume dropped a thousand miners'-inches of water an hour into its muddy surface.

The added insult was a sharp-nosed gondola floating in the huge reservoir. Digger studied the boat and spat into the water; the oily tobacco juice spread in a rainbow hue under the sun. Then he followed the fifteen inch drop-off pipe that would supply water to the monitors in the pit of the London Mine. Digger John's face screwed up in desperation as he watched the preparations. The water was there, water he needed. He could wash out his small claim of gravel in a very short while, with that backed-up pressure, and the gleaming battery of monitor-nozzles resting quietly in the London Gravel Mine.

He strode away from the London and headed across Main Street. He booted down the far boardwalk, and again the water of the Cedar Creek Ravine Ditch flowed by. Right under the boardwalk. Water was everywhere, except pouring through the nozzle of his rusting monitor. He entered his adobe and slammed the door.

THE DAY of the celebration dawned. The President of the New London Mining and Gravel Company arrived in a high-wheeled black carriage. The shiny paint glowed through the red dust, and the tall Englishman was greeted by the mustached Harley. A group of Gold Run Citizens, were there, as well as Dredger Dan. The somber black clothes of the English mine-operator were in sharp contrast to Dredger's checkered red-and-white vest, and his bright blue California coat. The coat hung on the stubby hotel-man like a circus tent on broken tent-poles. Dredger's beaver hat rode high on his perspiring head, pushed back to shade his sweaty neck from the sun. Gold Run's nine-piece band tooted "Rule Brittania", until the horses shied and danced.

"Ah, the speakers platform?" the mine-president clipped out, directing his greeting to Harley. "I say, is the pod-yum prepared, old boy?"

"Quite, Sir James!" Harley clipped back, waving his arms toward the bunting hung, raw wood of the speaker's podium. "The valve is quite ready for the turning, for the silver flow of water to roar through the heavy ordnance pipe that will direct its water against the golden gravel of the New London Mine. The..."

"*Mister* Harley!" Sir James halted the engineer's flow of words. "Ah—the formal speech, the opening of the

valve—ah— I have prepared it, you know." He paused importantly, gazing quizzically toward Dredger Dan then directed another question at Harley.

"This man— Ah, I say, has he over-imbibed?"

"Dam' hootin'!" shouted Dredger Dan. "I ain't fully likkered yet, but onc't yew get that blasted valve opened, an' these monitors runnin', I'm goin' to be. Yew listen to me, Jimmy—or Sir Jimmy—" Dredger's dry lips spouted the words. "We got her set to go. They's a hunnert acres of fifty-dollar gravel; she's two hunnert foot deep an' a quarter-mile wide! Richest chunk of hydraulic propity in the Sierras. Now, get outa that wagon an' up on yore 'pod-yum' an' let's get started!"

"Right-ho!" answered the tall man. "It will be a great privilege." He stepped down into the street and climbed up the rickety steps to the speakers' stand.

Dredger Dan waddled over to the fire-bell, hawled vigorously on the rope leading to the bell atop the fifty-foot derrick. Men popped heads out of the saloons, and straggled into the hot sunlight. The crowd gathered and stared patiently at the dignitaries on the speakers' stand. Dredger Dan banged the clapper until he felt that a representative crowd had gathered; then, holding his coat-tails out of the dust, tiptoed around the back of the crowd and headed for his bar-room. He caught Sir James' opening words. "The London Mining Company is proud to open the New London gravel mine. Proud to open this valve to the silver flow of water that will..." Dredger ducked through the batwings of the deserted saloon and reached for a bottle.

"Just bring the jug." The words startled the blue-coated hotel owner. Turning slowly, he got just one dazed look at Digger John's determined face before the towel-wrapped pick-handle smashed the beaver hat flat, and Dredger Dan slumped toward the floor.

DREDGER DAN never remembered the trip through the back door of the saloon, nor the thumping of the burro as Digger led the animal, with Dredger's dangling body, over the route following the flume to Digger's hydraulic mine. He never heard the smashing pistol shots that Digger blazed into the sky, every few minutes. He never saw the crowd that followed. He came to, with the sparkling rainbow of water crashing against the face of Digger John's pit.

He was tied to a green timber, just under the towering wall of gravel. The water was crashing against the gravel, and muck was cascading in gulleys to the bottom, to be sucked up by the sluice boxes. Before Dredger's bleary eyes, the huge wall wobbled and swayed dangerously. A single, misdirected squirt of the monitor would cause those tons of gravel to slip, and would bury the broad hotel-man until it would take a week to uncover him. He twisted his neck and stared at the man at the monitor. It was a grim Digger John and he spun the valve and the roar of water died.

"Got somethin' to say, Dredger?" The miner grunted, preparing to reopen the valve.

"Where'd yew get the water?" For a moment, the puzzle of the water, caused the tied man to forget his danger. The danger of being directly beneath the towering face of the pit.

"I tied into the flume—there." Digger pointed to the rim of the pit. "But—it ain't gonna last long, Dredger."

The bound man glared at the flume. A huge pipe vibrated from the box of the flume. A trap of twelve inch boards had been hammered across the flume; the pipe leading off and the three hundred foot drop gave the monitor the force it needed to blast out the gravel face of the pit.

"What'cha got me tied here for?" quavered the bound man, a tingle of

fear entering his voice. "That face'll come down. Raise the nozzle higher, yew're undercutting the bank! They's a thousand tons of gravel ready to drop—"

"Yew're a stockholder in the London," Digger answered calmly. "Well—ain't cha?" He gave a twist to the valve and the water began spouting from the roaring nozzle.

"Shut off that water!" screamed Dredger. Sweat broke through the spray that covered his face. The valve squeaked, and the rainbow spray dissolved.

"What'd'ya want?" Dredger's voice was hysterical as it cut through the sudden silence. He turned pleading eyes toward the rim and, for the first time, realized the crowd was gathered there. He could make out the black clothes of Sir James and the white face of Harley.

"Don't look up *there* for help," growled Digger John. "They start down that bank, an' I'll let the entire face drop on yew. If they bust my pipe, she'll fall anyways. It's the nozzle-pressure that's keepin' her from cavin' right now. See?" He pointed to the undercut bank. "I can keep her from cavin' by shootin' water aginst the top—takin' the weight offa the wall."

"Then what'd'ya *want?"* Dredger yelled again.

'Wait'll I take some more offa the top," Digger said politely and opened the valve. Water roared and the muddy bank was sliced off a little at the top. The gravel sluiced down the gulleys and churned through the sluice box, leaving Dredger Dan standing knee-deep in rocks and slickings. The valve squeaked closed.

Digger then got around to answering. "I want yew, to tell them English Pirates up there—" He waved a hand—"to bring in six of them monitors. To string pipe from that reservoir an'—put six crews in here. If'n they *don't*—" his stubbled face hardened—"that face'll come down an' yew can't run!"

"They'll string yew up!" screamed Dredger Dan.

"For takin' my own water," chuckled Digger John, "or for killin' yew? Hell, Dredger, they'll all be so glad yew're dead, with all their debts cancelled, they'll most likely vote me a medal. Better make up yore mind. See that stake with the red flag? That's the end of my claim. When that bank is washed to the stake, I'll turn yew loose. Now—tell 'em to get the monitors in here!" He broke off hurriedly as the gravel-bank began to slide. He swung hard on the water valve. The monitor burped and roared its strength against the wall; catching the slide and blasting it safely away from the captive. For a frightful, full ten minutes, the water roared, then the noise died as the valve closed squeaking.

DREDGER DAN was shouting as the pit filled with silence. He roared orders, and the men on the bank scattered toward the London Mine. In a dragging hour, the monitors were hustled into the pit; the crews strung and clamped pipe like ants in a honey jar, and the monitors were roaring against the wall over Dredger's trussed body. The night crept in and sputtering torches guttered in the clouds of spray, as the monitors ate into the Digger John Mine. The dirt and rocks bounced down the sluices; riffles soaked up the fine gold and the slickings roiled over into the undercurrent, to be stirred and pitchforked by a dozen men.

Digger remained at his monitor, keeping the bank bulging over Dredger Dan's head. The night passed, and at noon of the following day, Digger shut off his water and clumped through the mud to retrieve the stake holding the soggy red flag. It had floated down under the flow of water, like the guidon of a dying corporal. The battery of monitors brought up from the London Mine, whispered to a dull, uneasy, silence.

Dredger Dan, a soaking muddy

mess in a torn blue coat and a wrinkled checkered vest, watched Digger's approach from beneath his wilted beaver hat. Digger held a fourteen inch bowie knife in his water reddened hand. He rubbed the razor tip against the ropes and watched the raveled strands drop.

"Now." Digger raised his voice. The crowd on the bank stilled their chatter. "Now—my claim's cleaned. But I got to make my clean-up from the sluice boxes. This money-grabbin' critter," he nudged the hotel-man with the tip of the gleaming bowie, "is gonna stay right with me. Anyway, he's just protectin' his investment. Half of what I clean up'll go for what I owe him; I'll also pay for the water I used, at fifty-cents a miner's inch. Wages for the monitor crew'll be three dollars per day. They done fine, an' a bonus of a jug of Dredger's whiskey'll go with them wages.

"I figger that's fair." He again nudged Dredger Dan with the knife tip "What'd yew figger, Dredger?"

"It's—it's a fair deal," the bedraggled man snorted to the knife. The crowd on the bank hooted and cheered.

●

That night, the hotel saloon was crowded. Dredger Dan, his soggy water-bleached face still gray, dipped tin cups into the open barrel and slid them along the bar. "Anybody smell smoke?" he asked.

Digger John, stationed in his favored spot beside the barrel, held a brimming cup and grinned at Dredger. Dredger tried to grin back but he was still weak and his hands shook like a miner finding a rattlesnake as a bed companion.

"Y'know, Dredger. I left off that stump blastin' job fore I was finished."

"Don't fool with it no more," pleaded Dredger Dan.

"Oh, I done it already," grinned Digger placidly and sipped his drink.

"What'd yew done already?" moaned Dredger.

"Them stumps. I set 'em all afire. It's the easy way an'..."

"Yew what?"

"Them stumps," Digger explained. "I'm burnin' out the roots."

"The one in front of the hotel?" Dredger's voice was shocked.

"Sure. That's the biggest one."

"But those roots run under the hotel!" shouted Dredger Dan. "It'll burn the hotel down. That's what's happening right now! Look'it the smoke comin' through the floor...!"

In panic, Dredger slapped a cup full of whiskey at the burning floor boards. For a second, the liquid sizzled and smoked, then broke into a bright blue racing flame.

★

Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones are back!

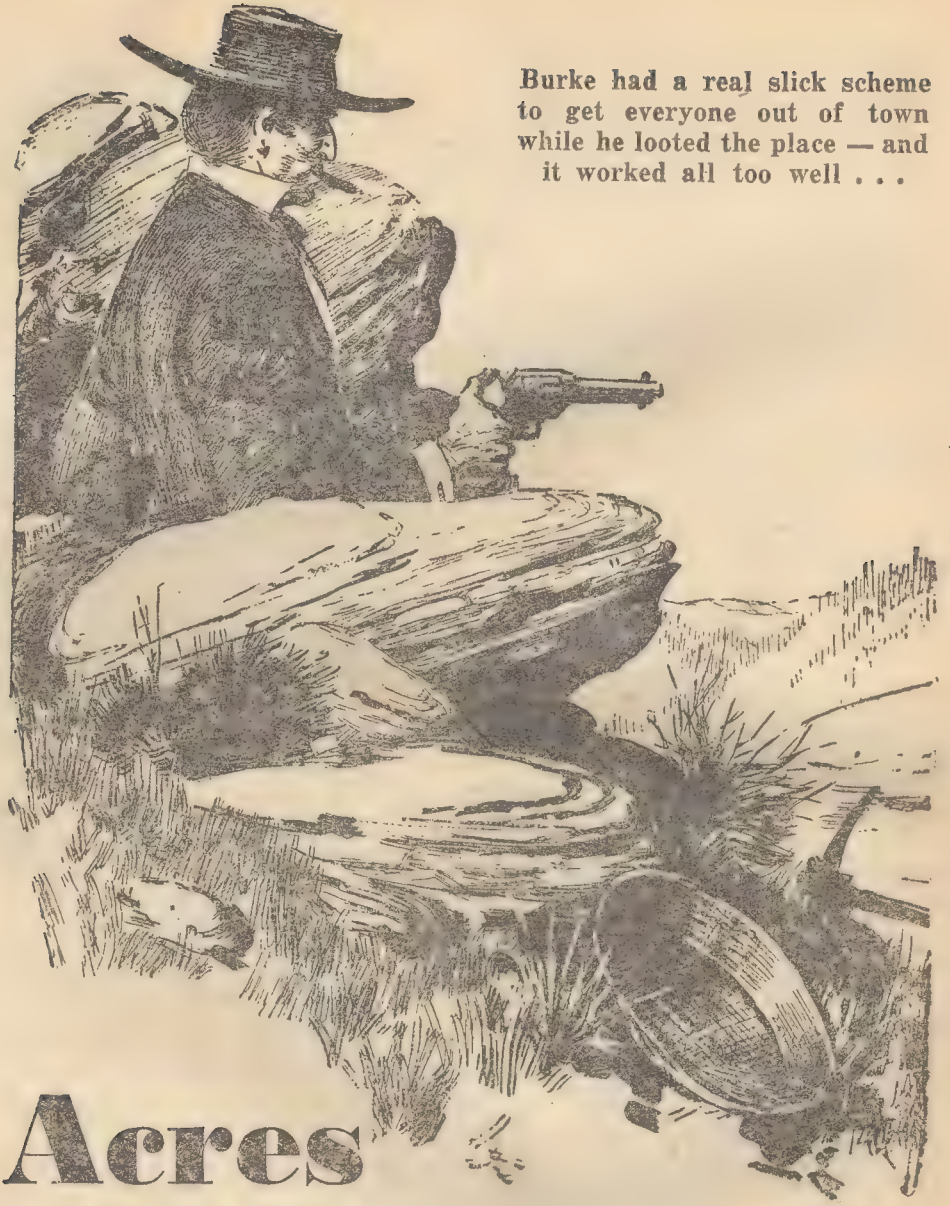
in a novelet

COLT-TALK AT COTTONWOOD

by Lee Floren

leading off the big December issue of

REAL WESTERN STORIES



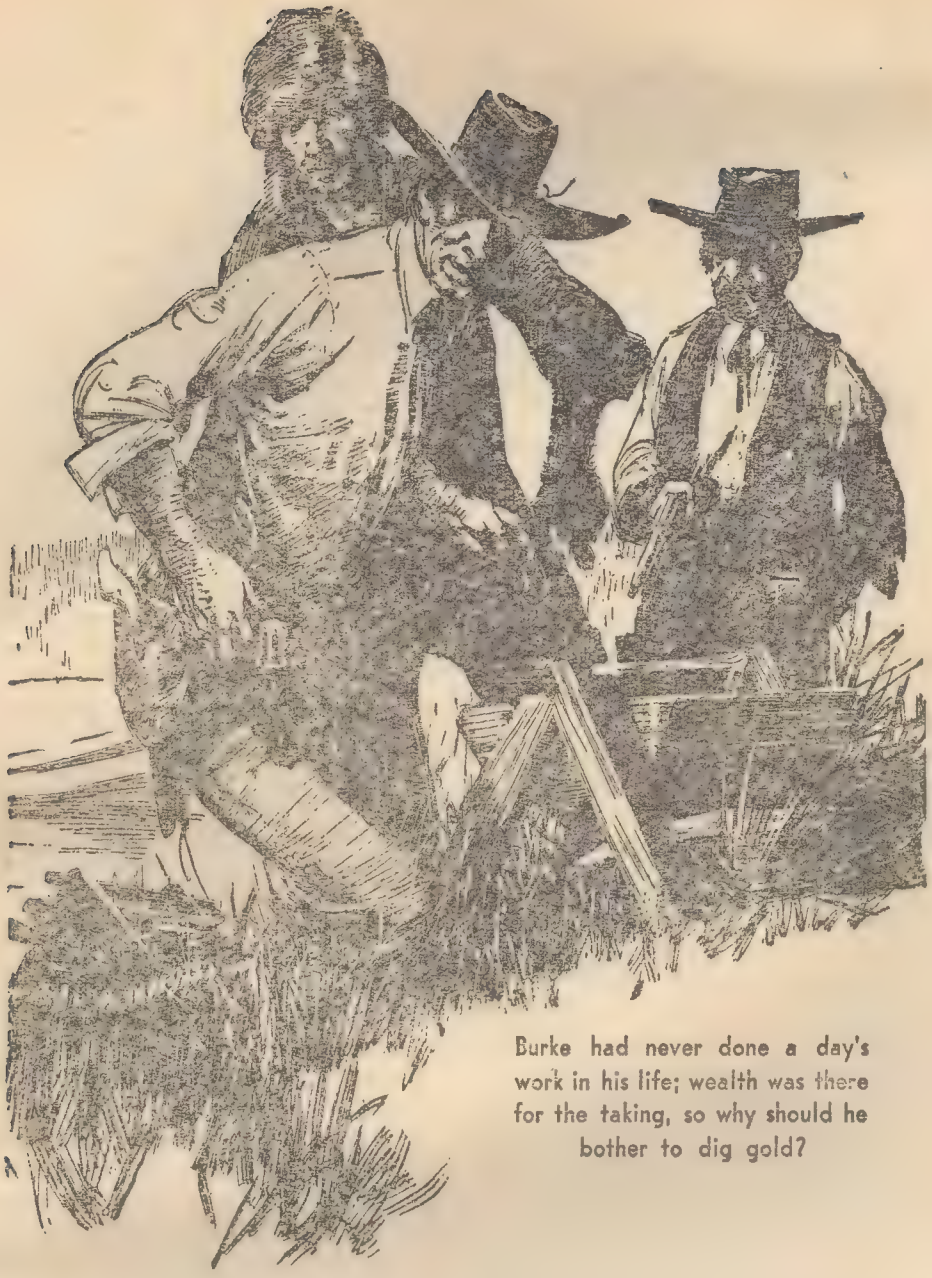
Burke had a real slick scheme to get everyone out of town while he looted the place — and it worked all too well . . .

Acres Of Gold

by RICHARD BRISTER

ALVIN BURKE slouched alone at a corner table in the *Gold Dust Saloon* and observed with disdain the drunken antics of the corduroyed miners along the bar. Only fools drank so much that they lost their powers of observation, and only double-dyed-in-the-corduroy fools grubbed the wherewithal from the stubborn earth with pick and shovel.

Burke had arrived in this booming California gold-camp only yesterday,



Burke had never done a day's work in his life; wealth was there for the taking, so why should he bother to dig gold?

but already his black eyes had sized up this camp and its people. And already he had begun to formulate a plan which would separate these work-worn numbskulls from the gold they had grown calluses upon their hands for.

"Any man that works for a living," Burke told himself with a self-congratulatory grin, as his plan of campaign became clearer to him, "is either a plain damfool, or too gutless to take what he wants without workin'."

He poured a drink of rotgut whiskey from the tall bottle on the table in front of him, and sluiced it down his throat quickly, then wiped his thin mouth with the back of one hairy hand.

His shrewd black eyes remained observant throughout, watching a bit of horseplay at the bar, where a group

of staggering miners were teasing a not-too-bright-looking member of their group, who was tall, loosely hung at the shoulders and at the jaw, and who went by the name of Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson.

Every time Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson attempted to lift his whiskey-glass to his bearded mouth, one of his companions would "accidentally" bump his arm, or jostle against him. It was truly amazing how many times this pointless little joke was repeated before Chiggerhead Charlie realized he was being purposely heckled.

"Y-you—you f-fellas c-cut that out," he said in a fumbling voice. The miners laughed.

And over in his corner, watching like a cat stalking its prey, Alvin Burke permitted the thinnest of smiles to twist his long face.

"I'll say he ain't bright," Burke told himself; "he's made to order for what I want of him."

Burke had a full-grown plan worked out now. He had a pouch in his pocket containing a few hundred dollars in gold-dust, and several large nuggets; this was bait.

He sat there at his corner table, quietly watching the group at the bar for perhaps an hour, until finally he saw the opportunity for which he had so patiently waited. Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson was left alone at the bar, temporarily.

Burke picked the half-empty whiskey bottle from his table, took it up to the bar, and said to the white-aproned man behind the mahogany, "I'll pay up for what I've drunk of that; guess I had enough for one session."

Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson watched with dull absorption as the bartender weighed out three dollars' worth of Burke's dust, then returned the sack to him.

It was during Chiggerhead's absorption with the weighing of the dust that Burke's hand dropped three large gold nuggets into Charlie's coat pocket.

BURKE WALKED out of the *Gold Dust Saloon,* and went down the muddy main stem of the camp to Jeb Priddy's restaurant tent, where he distastefully filled his belly with what the New Englander called Mulligan stew. Burke belched as he stood up and walked away from the restaurant, telling himself the sooner he shook the dust of this uncivilized camp from his boots, the better he'd like it.

He went down to the cluster of crude, unpainted frame shacks that passed for a livery-stable, and asked the groom, a beefy, flat-headed son with a gimpy leg and a cast in his eye, how things were going.

"Jest fine," the liveryman said.

Burke looked at Jeannie, his short-coupled, high-headed black mare, and said, "She looks kind of thin; you sure she had her full share of oats this mornin'."

"Sure she did; I don't skimp on feedin's here, mister."

"All right, all right," Burke said. "No need to get an itch on about it." It was not good policy to alienate the man to whom you delegated the care of your horse. Burke made his voice friendly. "Horse bung that leg up for you, friend?"

"That's right. Throwed me right into a corral fence. Busted my leg so she never set proper. And knocked one eye out of kilter."

"Sometimes a man's luck is all bad," said Burke, and took a silver dollar out of his pocket. "Well," he said, as he flipped the coin over, "take good care of my Jeannie."

"Why, thankee," said the groom. "I'll do that."

Burke turned back toward the *Gold Dust Saloon.* Fifty yards from the building, he paused briefly, watching a tall man come out of the swing-doors to the sidewalk, glance furtively up and down the muddy street, then move off at a half-walk, half-jog.

Burke couldn't help chuckling. "Looks like my little trap has been sprung," he said softly.

He went on up the street, and swung into the saloon. The place had changed greatly since he had walked out in search of a meal, perhaps an hour ago.

The bartender was standing behind the bar with a harried look on his face, surrounded by a group of tense-faced miners, who were pumping questions at him.

"You say he stuck his hand in his pocket and come up with them big nuggets, and then made off like he didn't know where they come from, Frank? Is that it?"

"Listen, Frank, he's struck it rich out there on his claim; ain't that about the size of it?"

"He's struck it rich and he's tryin' to play foxy with us. Hey, Frank?"

"Boys," said the harried bartender, "I've told you all I know. He claimed he didn't have no idea where them nuggets had come from."

"They never growed there in Chiggerhead's pocket."

"Frank, if you ask me, old Chiggerhead dug them nuggets out of the ground, up there on his claim, and figured to sit tight on his secret. Then he forgot hisself, see? He fetched 'em out, right in public, seen what a fox pass he'd made, and commenced to act dumb. He don't fool nobody. They's gold out his way."

The bartender was removing his white apron, even as he shrugged and bobbed his perspiring head, and said, "I dunno, boys. Could be Chiggerhead's lucked onto somethin'. Could be he hasn't." He came around from behind the bar.

"Here, let's have a drink here, Frank; where you goin'?"

"Boys," said the bartender, "you'll have to get out so's I can close up now; they's an errand I got to tend to."

And he was shooing his customers out of the *Gold Dust Saloon* with urgent motions of his plump, pale hands.

"Errand, hey!" snapped one of the evictees. "Well, you seen the color of Chiggerhead's nuggets, Frank. I reckon if what you see was enough to convince you, why, I got an errand of my own to tend to."

THE MAN swept out of the door quickly. The others stood undecided for a moment, drawn by John Barleycorn in one direction, by gold-lust in the other. Gold-lust prevailed, as Alvin Burke had known it must. The group of men spilled out onto the street, caught in a sudden hot swirl of excitement, and ran in their separate ways, spreading confusion upon the sleepy little camp in a matter of minutes.

Alvin Burke stood outside of the *Gold Dust Saloon,* watching the able-bodied men of this camp conduct a panicky exodus in the direction of Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson's claim. Within half an hour, the streets contained only a handful of women and children; three rheumatic oldtimers too badly crippled to ride or walk to the newly publicized "gold strike"; Alvin Burke; Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson; two dogs, and a flock of chickens.

Alvin Burke stood picking his teeth in front of the *Gold Dust Saloon,* where he had remained throughout the excited exit of the camp's able-bodied defenders. He was smiling softly, in a way which was not reassuring to the three old men or to the women and children.

Or to Chiggerhead Charlie, the innocent pawn in Burke's little chess game. Chiggerhead sat on a stoop across the street from Burke, trying to shake the fumes of whiskey out of his head, so that he could understand the weird pattern of events which had overtaken him in the past few hours.

"Hull t-town's on a g-goose chase," he fumbled. "I n-never seen them n-nuggets until I p-pulled 'em outta my p-pocket. C-can't s-see why they n-never b-believed me."

Burke stood against the false front of the *Gold Dust,* still smiling. The three rheumatic old men hobbled creakily down street from the direction of Jeb Priddy's restaurant-tent, and engaged Chiggerhead in conversation. "You sure set off a powder-keg, Chigger."

"I n-never m-meant to. Ain't n-no g-gold strike out on my c-claim. Just l-low-assay stuff, l-like everywheres else. Dang f-fools'll callous their hands up for a couple days, th-then d-drift b-back to c-camp blamin' me f-for their aches 'n' p-pains." His eyes lifted toward where Burke stood, across the wide street. "H-how c-come you n-never r-rode out with the others, mister?"

Burke laughed deep in his throat. "The real strike," he said, "is right here in camp. And I figure to make it. Commencing," he added in a silky smooth voice, "this minute."

Almost casually, he lifted one of his sixguns from its holster and pointed it straight at Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson.

"S-say-y-y, lookee h-here, m-mister, y-you can't—"

"Shut up," snapped Alvin Burke. "Stand up and walk over here. Hold it, pop; I'm talkin' to all four of you. Now just step over here nice and easy, and you may live to tell this."

Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson's stupid face was slack with surprise, and the three old men stood their ground, looking sullen. Burke jabbed the gun forward a little, and his voice rasped like a forty-five slug biting into a gale. "Move, when I tell you!"

SLOWLY, the four crossed the muddy street. Chiggerhead wore a gunbelt, and Burke reached out carefully and extracted the man's gun from the holster, thrusting it down under his own belt.

"All right; now I want you three oldtimers to stand in a circle around me—just in case one of them females gets a notion to start taking potshots. All right, hold it right there. Not too close."

Under the threat of Burke's big gun, the three old men had made a protective triangle around him. Burke aimed at the lock on the door of the saloon and shot once, twice. The door swung awry and Burke kicked it open. He grinned at Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson.

"Get inside there and empty that till. I'll be watchin' every move you make from here at the door. All right, hop to it; this ain't no picnic."

Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson was not bright, but he understood the message that threatening sixgun conveyed. He stumbled hurriedly into the saloon, slid around in back of the bar, and began to empty the contents of the cashbox onto the bar.

"Dump it onto one of them aprons," Burke snapped, from his observation post at the doorway. All along the wide street, since his two shots had sprung the lock on the *Gold Dust Saloon,* activity had ceased. Women and children stared at Alvin Burke, at the three beleaguered old men who made a protective triangle around him.

Impotent anger was in every eye; but so far, no hand had been raised against Burke. Still, it was a strain upon a man's nerve, to hold a whole community at bay, single-handed.

"Look alive in there," Burke snapped, and sent a slug hurtling over Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson's head. The slack-faced miner jerked back in alarm, almost losing his grip on the apron into which he had dumped the contents of the cashbox.

"All right," Burke said, "let's have a look-in at Priddy's."

With the three sullen old men forming a shield for him, with Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson marching in front of his gun, Burke moved like a conqueror up the wide street to Jeb Priddy's restaurant-tent. Priddy had joined the gold-rush, but his woman had remained to watch over things in his absence.

She was standing in back of the counter, hanging on grimly to a cheap-looking tin box. Judging from the wild look in the woman's eyes, that tin box contained a small fortune.

"You'll not be taking what Jeb and me slaved so hard for," said the woman. "You'll have to shoot before I'll let go of this box."

Burke's eyes narrowed. Giving half his attention to Chiggerhead and his three aged escorts, he lunged out suddenly and slapped the woman hard on the cheek with an open palm. A red welt appeared where the blow struck that pale cheek, but it was surprise, more than pain, which forced Jeb Priddy's woman to release her hold upon the fruits of long labors.

She let go of the box, and Alvin Burke quickly grasped it by the handle. The woman, suddenly hysterical, ran around the counter at Burke, screaming epithets, swearing she'd have his eyes out. Burke lifted the sixgun and hit her a clubbing blow on the head. The woman groaned and fell in a sprawling heap at his feet.

ONE OF THE old men started at Burke, running headlong into the threat of Burke's sixgun, croaking, "By damn, they's a limit."

Burke put a bullet over his shoulder, saw the way this was going to be, and spanked lead into the old fool's rheumatic heart. Now two victims lay at his feet, and he swung his bitter glance at the other three, saying, "Any more would-be tin heroes around here? If there are, I'll sure accomodate 'em."

"Y-you ain't g-going to get away with it," said Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson.

Burke smiled that thin smile, amused at the idea of dull Chiggerhead trying to predict his future.

He dropped the Priddy tin box, and using the gun he had taken from Chiggerhead Charlie, he shot the lock off it. A welcome spray of silver dollars and greenbacks spilled out onto the ground. He jerked the gun at Chiggerhead Charlie. "Add that to what's in the apron, and tie a knot in it."

Burke stuffed the knotted apron down under his belt, grinning still, and said, "All right, gents; it don't pay to be too greedy. Now let's go."

He motioned them down street, toward the livery-stables. They moved along sullenly, under the constant prod of Burke's sixgun.

Somebody let loose with a buffalo gun, behind and above the street, and Burke, turning toward the noise like a cat, saw a boy's freckled face disappear from an upstairs window. He spanked lead up there, to give the boy something to think about.

He jabbed his sixgun into the small of Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson's broad back, "Stay right there, in that line. If anyone wants to irrigate me, they're going to have to take you along too, friend. All right, now; let's run for it."

He and Chiggerhead Charlie set off at a jog toward the livery shacks, leaving the two oldsters in the street behind.

"Get him!" somebody was yelling. "He shot Uncle Dan and clubbed Ella Priddy."

Burke felt the skin of his back crawl, anticipating the brutal impact of a rifle slug. But another voice called out behind him, "Don't shoot; you'll kill Charlie."

Burke swung into the gate of the livery, putting a frame building between himself and the pursuit, and he felt good now. He took his gun away from the small of Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson's back.

"I put them nuggets into your pocket," he gloated; "I started that gold-rush on purpose. Tell the boys all about it, when they ride in. All right; you can skedaddle."

He waved the gun, and Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson gulped and ran back to the street.

STILL CHUCKLING at the smoothness with which his little plan had worked out, Burke trotted into the shack where Jeannie was stabled. The beefy-legged groom with the cast in his eye was gone—a fact which Alvin Burke found not too surprising.

Then he saw the empty stall, with the note tacked on the headboards, and a sick panic thrust at him.

Mister Burke:

The black mare ain't been stole, so don't worry. I've took and rode her out on the gold rush. I'll take good care of her, like you told me. And if I find anything out there, I'll consider the use of your horse the same as a grubstake, and go halvies with you.

I sure hope you ain't sore; I got a hunch we're goin' to be lucky.

It was the almost-awesome irony of that final sentence, more than anything else, which completely demoralized Burke, for the moment, and permitted Chiggerhead Charlie Jackson to steal up behind him.

"I g-got a g-gun," said Chiggerhead Charlie, and then Burke could feel the prod of it, as Chiggerhead Charlie pulled Avin Burke's guns out of the holsters and flung them aside. "C-come on in, Gramps. I g-got him, I r-reckon." He spoke to Burke. "The boys'll h-hang y-you up r-real sudden, when they c-come b-back from the goose chase y-you s-sent 'em out on."

Burke was looking at that note the groom left for him, trying with part of his dazed, terrified mind to make sense out of the groom's promise to repay Burke for the use of the mare by splitting with him on any gold he found out there.

The damfool, Burke thought, suddenly furious. Didn't the eighteen-karat idiot realize there wasn't any real goldstrike out there?

The black mare ain't been stole, he read dully, *so don't worry.* Suddenly he could feel the bite of hemp at his neck, and a racking sob shook his body.

★

Bat Astor was vicious and sadistic — a friendless man who wanted it that way. He gloried in enforcing his own brand of law with guns blazing from behind a star of authority. And Ross Randall knew that it was high time for Astor to receive his just due — a showdown was bound to come.

don't miss

PACIFY EAGLE MESA

by Seven Anderton

it leads off the December

WESTERN ACTION

It was no different, here on Dock Street. Men still were greedy — wanting more than they could use. And Phil Lancey knew then that he had not really run away. For he learned that no man can really run away from himself.

Nesters, Dig Your Graves!

by W. Edmunds Claussen

PHILLIP LANCEY came down off the sway-backed gang-plank of the river packet *Lexington Star* and cast around with his vacant gray eyes. His closely chiselled face very plainly showed the marks of inner pain in its ashen color, the skin pulled taut over high cheek bones, and the fine lines boxing his mouth. It was a hard town, he could see that as his half boots struck the sand at the head

of Steamboat Landing's Dock Street.

It was a town that would strip a man and take him apart and leave only his raw, naked soul waiting for hell's gate to open.

But Lancey had nothing left to lose. Nothing but the fine broadcloth coat fitted to his narrow back, the black medical bag in his left hand, and the oil-slick Colt .38 at his waist—the gun with which he had killed a man two hundred miles down river.

What they tried to do to his body here in Steamboat wouldn't matter. The soul of Phil Lancey was dead already. You could see that by looking at the flatness of his eyes. The weakness in his blood for cards had overpowered him and he'd neglected his practice to gamble once too often. The game had ended in the fog shrouded morning with him winning a roll of bills too fat to slide into his pocket. And the raven-haired gambler, Eaton, had proved a tinhorn. He hadn't known how to lose that much money. He'd gone for his gun and Lancey had shot him.

Phil had watched while the blood soiled Eaton's spotless linen, finally worked out in little streams along the tight mouth before the tinhorn pitched to the floor. Then Phil had run hatless to his office. In sudden panicky fear he'd grabbed his medicine case and slunk ratlike to the wharf where the *Lexington Star* had warped in for the night. What happened to the money he didn't even remember.

Not that any of this now mattered. The thing that lay raw against Phil's mind was the fact he'd tried to run away—scared like a quaking cony. The thought of this weakness now turned the doctor's insides to water.

Coming off the plank behind him were the bull-tough rivermen and camp followers. Roustabouts, like himself kicked out of towns below; calloused graders and laborers for the railroad working west; big, brick-topped Irishmen and Swedes, a few raw-boned Danes. He could hear, also, the cackle of the women passengers. Nesters' wives! The *Lexington Star* had been filled with these green hopefuls. Her deck cargo had been made up mainly of plows and farming implements and bulky sacks of seeds. Two fairly new Pittsburgh wagons had been chained forward to the deck.

Lancey paused now to listen to an argument. Hardcase cattlemen and their hirelings had flocked about each farm family.

"Ain't no freighters left in Steamboat," one boot-brown cowman ground out. He was dressed in the full regalia of the boom town tough including a Colt .45 on his right hip, balanced by and ugly bowie knife on the left.

"How'll we get our outfits to the homestead land?" a long-legged, lank farmer pleaded.

The leering hardcase laughed—a hollow guffaw. "Dulane don't want any more homesteaders on our range. Either you can leave your stuff to rot where it sits or take it back down river when you go."

The cowman's eyes ran to the hull of the steamboat where the second bright-colored Pittsburgh was being lowered over the paint-peeled railing. His voice lifted to a roar. "Hey, men, get them wagons!"

"You sure can smell 'em comin', Buell!" one of his hands laughed.

They gathered on each side of this freighter wagon. Some pulled at the pole while others worked from behind. They got it rolling toward the river while the farmer stood slack jawed. Against a background of roaring, ribald voices, they toppled it from the wharf into a river that was filled with four feet of water and mud.

Serious fighting would have broken had the nesters been organized as were the cowmen. But they weren't, and Phil's eyes traveled to the steamboat's rail where Captain Morse was sucking his corncob in the sun, his beady pig eyes taking it all in and grinning. When this was over he'd have a full packet returning to West-

port next morning. It made extra money each haul—with the fare back double the ride upstream.

The remaining Pittsburgh hit the muddy Missouri in a wide cascade. This time Buell and his crowd had not caught its owner unaware. The loose-framed nester came charging in like an ox.

Buell ducked the nester's flailing fists. His own paw drilled out amid the jeering of the crowd and the farmer slid down against the packet's docked cargo. There he lay motionless.

The farmer's wife was bearing down on Buell, now, and the crowd yelled louder, anxious to discover how the big cowman could handle women.

She bruised Buell along the side of his face with a bulging pig-hide satchel and for a moment hatred flared in his vicious eyes. He was like a bison bull stung with pain. Then he ran out a straight hook that connected on the tip of her blunt chin and she flew off the edge of the wharf. Her balloon skirts flared wide when she flopped into the river.

LANCEY had stood still through all this. When the craggy-faced renegade struck, it did something to Phil. He was a Southern man, schooled in New Orleans, and striking women was not to be found in his book of chivalry. Unconsciously he found himself moving in on the sulking crowd. His fists clenched at his side and white anger worked through him.

From the corner of his eye he caught the oval face leaping down from the seat of a light spring wagon. He had seen her waving before—to someone apparently near him. Now she surprised him suddenly by blocking his way.

"Alex, please don't mix!" she said in a strained voice. "Let them fight this out."

His eyes ran down to her face and he saw it was filled with fear. A fear for him! Her eyes were blue, deep and velvety, and her flaxen hair was lying loose over her shoulders. A long face, not strikingly beautiful, but strong of character and gracefully moulded of good clay. His eyes ran to the deep rise of her bosom. She was full, round, lithesome. He was sure he had never laid eyes on her face before.

"Don't you remember Jenny, brother?" her lips were petulant. "I've changed, I know! It's been so long, Alex. We've been waiting so patiently for this!"

He felt her grip tighten about both arms and through her fingers the throbbing flow of her eagerness was speaking louder, even, than her eyes.

He knew then he was standing on the crossroads of his life. The future seemed dim, with far, uncertain horizons no matter which way he trod. The incertitude of his thoughts was bringing an icy feel to his spine and he continued to watch her face mutely, fascinated by her mood. What would this future that Fate held in store prove to be?

She was still talking to him, with her yellow head pressed to his arm. Her voice was held low. "They fight like this each time a steamboat unloads, Alex. You should have seen how your little Jenny fought them when Papa and I first came. But we've got a nice cabin now, just as I wrote you. Leave the rowdies alone and they will soon tire of their fighting."

He saw that she was right. Already the nesters had given up all thought of striking back. They were hauling their dripping woman from the river and her husband was bobbing up and holding his bloddy face.

Buell's restless eyes flicked over the crowd. Phil saw them settle on Jenny and something about their glinting struck wariness in his breast. Jenny, too, felt the ominous forboding of the look. She jerked her head away and pink crawled up from under the vee of her dress.

A quality akin to shock came to Buell's face next as he stared at Phil. He wheeled to the steamboat and

yelled to Morse. Indistinguishable words passed between the pair.

The girl was leading him toward her spring wagon with faster steps. That brief picture gleaned from beneath her blue eyes had made Phil's decision for him. Very suddenly she stood for something in his life. Without her the pattern would seem empty, almost inept. He elected to cast his lot with her then, whatever that could mean at this moment.

They reached the wagon and she sprang off his arm to the seat with a minimum of effort. He slid his case to the floor and crossed behind the rig to the driver's seat. She had a nice span of blacks for the wagon. Maybe a little too much fat to their backs and withers, but they spoke well for her grazing land.

He glimpsed an immobile face pushing through the crowd as he gained his seat beside Jenny. The man wove fingers through the cheek strap of the near horse, and to one side of him Phil saw Buell fan out, eyes darting rat-like. The demand came from the man holding the team.

"Who is this fellow, Jenny Holm?"

Jenny's face ran ashen. It seemed at first she had no answer. Decision came to her slowly and then her mouth twitched and she said, "He is my brother. Now, Mr. Dulane, if you don't mind, we're ready to leave Steamboat Landing."

DULANE laughed. He was a tall, wide man, and Phil could feel the force of his long, smooth face as he moved in, thumbs hooked through his cross-holster belts. Strangely for this prairie country, Dulane wore no hat and his chestnut hair was clipped short, bristly. There was power and drive in the dark bluish jaw, in his square shoulders and his lean, hard belly.

This was the first time Phil had met Dulane. But legend of this man had carried down river; of his cattle that ran over a land too vast to be measured by the naked eye; how he had built an empire for himself feeding Ogallala and the western railroad with his beef.

In Buell's eyes Phil read a warning that Captain Morse had talked. He felt the familiar emptiness liquifying his stomach and he tried to steel himself against the spidery feel. Dulane moved in, his hand reaching for the wagon box. Phil fought his urge to strike the blacks and wheel the big man off his feet. The idea savored of running away, and he'd done too much running already.

"Get down, mister," Dulane said from a mouth suddenly gone stony. "In this country I don't let a killer ride with Jenny Holm!"

The corner of Phil's eye picked out Buell's palm brushing the .45 and his own hand slid to his Colt. Suddenly Dulane's fingers were on him, winding into the folds of his coat. Phil jerked his gun from under the long tails. It slashed an arc for Dulane's head but the cattleman already had him off the wagon. There was nothing but air under Lancey's bottom and his blow missed, slicing painfully over the edge of Dulane's face.

He heard the cowman's grunt and then came jarring contact with the road. Phil's fingers lost contact with his Colt and he stood bare-fisted against this choice pair of boom town killers.

A long-drawn hunger for action exploded in Phil's brain. He drove his fists and a sudden relief rushed over him—a lifting of the torment that had bothered him. One after another he aimed blows at Dulane's belt and the cowman puffed and reeled under the heavy impact of his fists. Dulane successfully took them, and then when Phil slowed, the man seemed to suddenly recover. He smashed home a hook that rolled Phil's jaw. Blood came into Phil's mouth and he knew his teeth had cut through his tongue. Anger blinded him as he closed in, throwing everything behind his sledging fists.

Dulane grimaced and tried to side-

step those fists that drove him steadily backwards. The crowd closed in, drawn by the solid, creeping sound of pummeled flesh. Then Phil felt knotty knuckles boring at his collar and he knew Buell was yanking him off. He heard Jenny's scream from the wagon seat.

"Why don't you fight him like *men?*" she cried and terror struck a note in her voice.

From then on it became a nightmare of slugging boots and vicious blows for Phil. Fire seeped into his brain and a mist blurred his vision. He was conscious of his body striking the dust and the impact rocked him further. He came to his knees gamely, only to have Buell's boot strike him hard along the top of his head. He went down, each time clawing back to make his try for Buell. Every cell in his body was whispering he must not quit. This was opportunity to prove to himself what kind of guts he had.

Blood rivered over his cheeks and his eyes were puffed into painful gashes. He could discern nothing through them now but a blurry impression of boots and coarse trousers and the hard, leering faces of staring men. Then Buell's boot sole crashed one final time into his face and darkness crept about him.

MANY TIMES during the night Phil Lancey's eyes opened only to flutter closed again. He was partly conscious, but the part of him that was alive whispered that he'd quit too soon. The voice was bitter, caustic in its denunciation. He hadn't yet used up all the fight stored in his body.

A thin groan slipped through his mashed lips. He slid into unconsciousness not realizing that those horrible moments during which he took everything Buell had to offer had already won his freedom within himself.

He had a dream. It was a terrible thing of empty land and unreal sky streaked red with fire. Against the painted clouds he made out a cross and as he came closer, he identified the grave marker as his own. Men were riding away from it on black horses. They rode stiff and straight in their saddles with never a backward glance. They were glad to quit this land with its forlorn and gruesome emptiness.

It brought him jerking upright on his bunk, wet with a clammy sweat. For a time the mental picture of that grave stayed to haunt him. Then the feel of bruised flesh overpowered his vision and he shook himself, driving the grave scene completely from his head. His battered flesh told him this time he had fought gamely. The thought was good and he laid back on his hard bunk to enjoy it.

A sound in the room snapped him back to bitter realities. With it came the feel of watching eyes. Phil sensed there were men behind the wall, or a door in which there was some opening. He caught Buell's guttural tones.

"Boss, I never seen two hombres look so much alike! To think it ain't been a week we fixed up the other fella in *Shadrack's Saloon* and dumped him in the river."

"Shut up!" the icy words were Dulane's, "you're getting thicker between the horns, Buell!"

"I'd sworn it was the same guy if Morse hadn't talked." Again it was Buell, voice filled with wonder. "You sure she took him for her brother?"

"I'm banking she won't find out different till we turn him loose. By that time she'll see things my way and it'll be too late."

"Still 'count on having her, Dulane?"

"We were engaged once. I never change my ideas, Buell."

They walked away until Phil heard their boots pause at the hall's end. Here they called to a third man and there was low-keyed palaver until the new man tilted his chair against the wall. From outside, Phil caught the creak of saddle leather. He heard horses stepping away from the rack

and knew Dulane was pulling out on some night mission.

He came erect on his bunk and looked around. Even before his eyes focused on the details of this room, he knew he was in their jail. They had thrown him here instead of the river because Dulane had a use for him. Some black scheme that would cheat Jenny Holm.

He doubted if his jailer had the keys to this cell in his possession. Dulane would trust these to none but himself. Phil's eyes next ranged the thick slabs planked across the walls and he knew he was here to stay. He laid back with his head reeling painfully. For a long while he gave up trying to build his thoughts into any sensible pattern.

He heard the guard rocking further back on his Congress chair. It was late, probably not many hours until dawn, and the man was tired. Presently his heavy, regular breathing came through the barred upper section of the door.

Phil slid from his bunk then and stretched his limbs. Every bone was sore and bruised. Yet, as a medical man, he did not overestimate the extent of his injuries. There was merely soreness here of bone and tissue; he had successfully overridden his more serious malady—the insidious whisperings that had plagued his soul ever since panic had trampled over his reasoning.

He moved silently to his window. It was quiet and dark along the length of street that could be glimpsed and the crowds had long since left the barrooms. The dust lay still in the ruts, moulded like fresh snow in the white light of the moon. He caught the faint brushing of skirts by the jail's outer wall. A cloying aroma of heady perfume came to him, lifting his heart.

"Jenny," he called as soon as her head showed, "you shouldn't come here!"

Her mouth lifted in an irresistible smile. "How you do talk, man. After what I've led you into!"

She was moulded by deep shadow, dressed in a loose coat or a cloak of some dark material, but her hair was still uncovered. It lay against her shoulders still yellow and soft in the dark. She moved past his barred window. He felt relief, then this turned into agitation as she slipped into the entrance of the jail. He trust his cheek against the bars. "Go away, Jenny!" he begged.

His heart hammered as the door squealed on its iron hinges. He knew she had gained the inner corridor and his hands gripping the window bars turned white.

There was silence as she paused somewhere inside the tiny guard room. Phil thought of the man snoring on his tilted chair and the lull brought him ugly pictures. Then he heard her key grating against the rusty tumblers and he took the door in one leap. The spike-studded panels turned aside and she stood there extending his gun leather in one hand. Lamplight fell slantwise across her pale hair and he knew as he looked he had never seen a more lovelier sight.

"I found it on a wall peg," she said simply.

Phil caught the snap of the jailer's teeth, the man coming to life. His Congress chair dropped to four legs and a throaty roar filled the guard room.

"Don't move, ma'am. I'd hate to drill a woman!"

Phil's shoulder banged against the door, and sent it rolling back. The clatter of the jailer's pistol was a welcome sound breaking the stillness. Then Phil was bounding around the corner, the comfortable feel of his Colt grip plates against his palm. His arm lashed down and he dropped the half-risen guard with his barrel across the head. On the jailer's cowhide vest he saw a glinting marshal's badge. Dulan sure had this town tucked inside a palm!

"My team is hitched at the last rack," Jenny said smoothly. "Du-

lane's ready to fight the valley. We'd better get started."

"The key!" Phil gasped. "Where did you get it?"

She was saying quietly, "There are always means to a woman—when the risk is worth taking." But her eyes had dropped beneath his gaze.

"One thing I want to get straight about this deal, Miss Jenny. I'm not your brother."

"I know that now, Philip. I found your medicine case in the wagon. Your papers and your name were there also. I wonder if you can ever forgive me, after I've drawn you into this?"

Her eyes had come up to meet his squarely and he was moved again by the strength of them. He said involuntarily, "It wouldn't be hard, Jenny Holm. You put new taste in living."

She ignored his words, her hand reaching to his arm. Together they moved into the chill street. "You are a man of medicine. If you're still willing, you must come with me. Medicine is what our neighbors need so badly!"

FOR HOURS they bounced across a treeless, rolling plain west of the river. The moom had disappeared but now there was a vivid coloring running through the east. Jenny had not said much, but now the urge had come to unburden her trouble.

"Three years ago we came to this country from Norway. Papa and Alex and I. Alex went first into the Sierras after the gold, while Papa and I found our way here to this land that is so vast. Where there is so much, man loses his perspective and grows hungry for more."

A pathetic shudder passed through her and Phil caught the tremor with his shoulder. She went on, "We built our house and our sheds and fenced a field. It was hard work and I did most of it, for Papa is not well. See my hands."

She held them extended and Phil saw how the callouses had worked over her palms. With his mind's eye he saw her grubbing the brush and yanking on wire. She was a woman to stir the deepest parts of a frontier man. The hand she offered lay between his fingers quietly, without any warmth, and without the promise of any great feeling.

She was still talking. "We are proving-up our land, and the wait will not be much longer until our papers. We have the water, a cool, deep pool. It's a sweet spot that I know Alex will love when he comes."

"Jenny," he asked again, "tell me where you found the cell key."

For a long time she brooded while he let the blacks lull in their collars, gaining their wind. Then she said softy, "When he first courted me, I thought Dulane was a fine man. Then I came to understand what a hog he was. His greed for land will never be filled, and I know now he let us homestead only because he wanted a price. I was to pay that price."

Her voice trailed lower. "He knew I took a room tonight in Steamboat Landing, to wait until I discovered what happened to you. When he came to my hotel, he supposed I still thought you were my brother. He told how you had killed a man, and he offered to give you a chance to go free if I talked the other settlers into moving out of our valley."

Phil said testily, "There won't be any warrant. It was kill or be killed with me, Jenny."

"I'm glad, Philip. Well, I went weak on Dulane when he put his arms around me. I played a woman's game and lifted his key. Once I had what I was after, I told him flatly that we'd never leave his country. He rode out storming and his men were all threatening to drive us off the prairie. But they won't. When Alex comes, it will be different!"

Phil was forced to turn from her piquant profile before he could tell her. "They've killed your brother, Jenny. You'll never see him."

She sobbed. It was a broken, husky

sound that died in her throat. Then her head dropped against his shoulder. They drove that way through the graying dawn.

●

They skirted a coulee and came into the clearing from the west. Jenny alerted, her eyes staring into the dusty half light. "Just ahead, Philip. That's home!"

The horses pulled against a gentle rise and Phil looked in expectation upon a wide scene of emptiness. There was no cabin here, no sheds and no strung wire running on poles. What he saw instead set hackles bristling along the back of his neck. Beside a glimmering little pool stood the awry cross, its background the red-streaked eastern sky. The general scene paralleled so closely his dream of last night that a chill stole over him.

An explanation came to him as he set the blacks nearer. Half conscious, he had overheard Dulane telling Buell how the men had burned the Holm cabin while the girl was away from it. From his subconscious he had drawn the woof and warp to complete his picture. Nevertheless, it remained uncanny.

"It stood here. The cabin—the sheds—" Jenny's wide eyes were flicking from spot to spot. Her cheeks were bloodless in the half-light. "Papa! They've murdered him!"

She was on the ground before he had his reins wrapped about the brake handle. He followed her to the weathered cross. They had opened no fresh grave here. The cross stood on flat, sun-baked soil beside the pool. Beneath it a crudely lettered sign read:

POISON WATER

The implication was plain enough. Dulane and his hard-bitten crew had wiped away all signs of settlement from this place and meant to discourage any fresh nesting beside his water hole.

Jenny's voice sounded then, strained. "I've seen that cross before. It stood ten miles north—along rutted lanes that were once the Oregon Trail. He—he's done it to frighten others away!"

"Where are these neighbors, Jenny?"

Her head inclined first toward the east. "Obie Schlenner lives alone at the head of the valley. It's the nearest place. It's rocky, on the side of a hill. The others are west and north—twenty other families."

"Could it be your father rode to Schlenner's place when he saw trouble coming?" Phil mused.

He said it more to put life back into her than because he felt the probability of any such thing. To the north he discovered red creeping into the sky. The glow of it was spreading to the western horizon. Jenny had seen it and her hands were knotted and nervous and Phil realized she, too, knew Dulane's tough hirelings had struck the nesters.

"Can I borrow a horse from Schlenner?" Phil asked.

"It'll do no good, Philip," she said hopelessly. "We'll ride to Obie's place and see if he knows anything of Papa. We must call the settlers together and talk them into leaving. If they don't get out there'll be graves up and down the valley!"

She scampered back into the spring wagon. Looking up, Phil saw that she was anxious to start. A dull anger was spreading across his face.

"We won't run from our trouble, Jenny," he told her sharply. He was conscious he had used the word *our*. "I tried running once and it didn't work. We'll fight Dulane. Single-handed if we must—but we fight!"

Her hand brushed his cheek and he sensed tenderness coming to her fingers. Yet he was certain she meant to argue the matter further when her pose suddenly stiffened. She was staring across the mile or two that stood between them and the burning cabins to the north.

Phil wheeled, his hand streaking beneath his coat. As he turned he made out two dark riders spurring their horses furiously. They were on a ridge and one already had his carbine lifted from his saddle boot.

There was a blur of red and the world spun giddily for Phil. He was conscious only of Jenny screaming his name, of the slug splintering the wagon behind him, and then his knees gave way and he buckled to the ground.

WHEN Phil came to, it was already full daylight. There was a wispy smell of burning logs and cloth to the air and he turned his head stiffly and looked into a cloudless sky. Buzzards soared a lazy circle impatient to sate their hungry bellies.

Things came back to Phil quickly. He cast about for the spring wagon but he was alone at Holm's water hole. Jenny, apparently, had taken him for dead and whipped her blacks to warn Obie Schlenner.

He jerked to a sitting position and brought sparks before his eyes. His fingers lifted across his temple and came away sticky. The pool was a matter of only a hundred feet beyond but the exertion brought sledging hammers to work within his head.

With his kerchief, Phil staunched the gash and bound it tightly. The water revived him surprisingly and he rocked to his feet searching for sign. Neither rider had closed in after the shot, and from this Phil guessed that they had spurred after Jenny. On the grass he found his Colt. Shoving it grimly into this belt, he started walking between the wheel ruts of her wagon.

It was a horrible trek and at first a fear came to Phil that he might not make it. Then gradually he took fresh strength as he called up final reserves of energy. He dropped down into a blunt-walled coulee through which wound the narrow wagon lane that lead to Schlenner's. From two other points into the coulee came converging swirls of dust and Phil understood other nesters were coming in under the protection of the broken country, their homes wiped out.

The red-bark cabin loomed just ahead. Behind it were sloping hills covered with a brown matting of brush and here and there misshapen rocks. He tramped on into the yard.

A dozen or more colorless nesters stared at the dried blood caked to his head and twice that number of pale faced youngsters scampered away, frightened by his appearance. Jenny's words came back about them needing a doctor. Sickness had recently swept the nesters' settlement. He read it in the muddy skins, the red-rimmed eyes, the starved, gaunt faces of the women peering at him from the house and the barns.

"They burned us all out now," one heavy jowled sod buster barked from the tailgate of his wagon. He was six foot two or three in his mud-crusted boots, seemed twice that tall to Phil Lancey looking up to the man on his wagon box. "All but Maloney and Schlenner here are burned clean!"

"We better pull out fast," another said. He was small, thin, disillusioned and bent before his time by grubbing dry fields.

"Running away gets you nowhere fast," Phil said tonelessly while he clung to the wheel of the wagon. He was aware that his voice sounded out of this world, and the nesters were staring at him like a spectre. "You don't run to get what you want. You fight!"

"Who are you?" the bib-fronted man on the wagon boomed.

A hollow chested, white haired farmer came in, grasped Phil by the arm. "You're the one!" his voice crackled excitedly. "You're the one Jenny talked about. You look like my son, Alex!"

Phil caught the likeness of Jenny's chin, her mouth, her eyes about the

creaking old man, and his pulse quickened. "Where's Jenny?" he demanded.

"Get up here!" the man on the wagon snapped. He gave Phil a haul to the flat wagon bed. "Now tell 'em again what you said about fighting!"

"It's true," Phil said again. "You don't win anything by running away. If your land's worth having—it's worth fighting for."

"It ain't worth dying for," the stove-up little nester complained. "Look what happened to Maloney. They'll be riding here next. If we think anything of our hides, we won't be here!"

"Who is this Maloney?" Phil asked. "Why did they leave his place standing?"

They pointed to a woman standing against the barn. There was moisture under her eyes, but in her hands she clutched an old smooth bore rifle.

"Paw fought 'em, mister!" she shouted lustily, "and I'm sure going to fight 'em too! They came on him while he was pitchin' hay to the horse. A big fella on a piebald mare pointed his smoke pole in Paw's face and told him to get a move on. Paw let fly his pitchfork and three of them tines sunk all the way into the land grabber's chest. Paw took a dozen balls of lead for that, mister, and they told me to get out and tell the other folks what would happen to them if they didn't get out. Last I saw of my place, they had the cowman on his back, still tryin' to yank Paw's fork out of his chest."

"Dulane is big," Phil admitted. "But his luck will run out. You can't lay down now like tired hogs if you want that land."

"Get up the slant," the big nester yelled from his wagon. "Back of them cussed rocks, you can easy pick 'em off."

Phil's hand lifted, cutting their cheering short. Up there on the hill without water, the women and kids would suffer if Dulane soullessly elected to hold them until they dried out in the broiling sun. He told them this.

"They'd expect you to hole up there. Bring the fight to them halfway and you'll have them licked. The gully's the place. Half of you on each side of the wagon lane and lay quiet till Dulane gallops in. You can take them flat-footed if you get him in the middle."

Men scurried each way hunting out their wives and kids and hugging them before the big fight. Some were swapping shells and shoving fresh loads into the chambers of their clumsy pieces. Already some were filing up the coulee on foot. The big nester clapped a hand across Phil's back. He said earnestly, "You'll be boss in this!"

But Phil's mind was working other threads into this picture. He saw Jenny Holm's father sliding an oily carbine between his crooked fingers and he jumped down to front the old man.

"Jenny?" he asked breathlessly.

Holm's tired eyes were glinting. His dry mouth pluckered and twitched. "Whipping her team toward Maloney's, last we seen of her. She was yelling back over her shoulder not to worry—she was making a deal with the ornery sons."

"Where were you?" Phil shrilled hotly. His eyes jumped to the big chested nester, bitingly. "Couldn't you stop her?"

The nester's hickory-clothed shoulders lifted indolently. "Jenny was mighty upset about what was going to happen to all these women and kids."

"Just couldn't hold her," old man Holm grumbled. "She seen you drop and naturally figured on you being dead."

THEY LAY low in the brush that hemmed the wagon lane a quarter mile below the Schlenner place. Each man crouched with his rifle or birdgun at his side. Some few held Sharps Fifties ready for action. Al-

ready they could see the dust plumes stirred by Dulane's hard riders bearing down the coulee.

Phil's thoughts were a churning cauldron of hot, barbed angles. He found himself torn between two purposes. He had found it nearly impossible to keep from stradling a horse and lighting to Maloney's place. Then cooler reasoning persuaded him he would serve her best by sticking with these farmers that he had riled to action.

His eyes squirted into the prairie heat waves as he counted off the seconds. To him it seemed the cowmen would never close the distance. Two or three of his nesters stirred nervously from their positions, heads showing. A sharp command brought them flat to the ground. At best, they were green hands at fighting. Phil wondered if they would break and run when Dulane's gunmen hammered up. Recollection of his own blind panic welled through him and he prayed these farmers would stick in the fight. The nesters had brought along no horses—and scattered bunch grass made mighty poor cover from burning lead.

Phil glanced over his forces again and found scared faces. The shallow coulee walls picked up the drumming hoofs and multiplied the sound a hundred times. Like war drums, the sound was driving fear into the hearts of the sod busters. Buell himself was riding in advance of his cowmen and they could read the viciousness stamped across his craggy face.

The time was up and Phil dragged taut a plait-rope he had hooked fast to the far side of the coulee. Buell caught sight of the yellow strand first and close-hauled his horse wickedly, flinging him to his knees in an attempt to stop inside the barrier. At the same time he was yanking at his notched six-gun.

Phil stepped into plain sight. He was holding down his Colt and from each side of the wagon lane now sprouted other grim-faced nesters, each man gripping his rifle at ready. Riders were piling up behind Buell amid dust and shrieking of the frightened horses.

"Drop those guns!" Phil roared against the racket. "We don't want any shooting, cowmen!"

Buell answered with a blast of his .45. The rolling pony spoiled his aim and Phil heard the thump of lead behind him. The little nester who had been afraid of dying slid face foremost into the coulee and savage cursing marked the anger of the nesters up and down the line. It was the opening of general shooting and on each side men fired point blank at one another. Dust and gunsmoke and the frightened screams of the wounded rolled across the plains.

Each man filed his sights with a hastily selected target and squeezed his trigger. If he lived through this, he frantically slammed a fresh load into his chamber and tried to find himself a new target. Here and there the single shot Sharps crashed with a mighty roar against this incessant clatter.

Phil searched for Buell but a screen of yellow dust hung over the foremost fighters. He had one shot left in his Colt for Buell. He dropped into the wagon lane on shaky legs. It took a good deal of weaving to get through the melee of unseated men and kicking horses. Then he spied the flaming, hate-seared face through a rift in the smoke. He lifted his Colt—yet withheld fire.

The big nester of the wagon—he of the oratorical lungs—had gotten into line with Buell. The nester's empty rifle was swinging a scintillating arc against Buell's cocked six. The .45 banged first and Phil saw the nester jerk from the shock of the heavy slug. But the moving rifle completed its arc. Buell took the full blow as the walnut stock crashed against his flared nostrils driving his face together. He went down and hoofs coming up behind quickly ground his belly to the dust.

As Buell's first shot had brought

the opening of hostilities, so his death now caused them to cease. The last shot reverberated through the coulee and Dulane riders were all standing with their hands dejectedly above their heads.

Phil leaped to the side of a gunhawk still clinging in his saddle.

"Where's Dulane?" he asked sharply.

"Maloney's cabin. Never figured you'd put up—ruckus like this." The gunman's face was pulled in a mask of stunned surprise. His fingers slipped off his wide saddle horn and he fell gripping at a bloody shoulder. Phil's boot struck the empty wooden stirrup and he hit the back of the bucking horse hearing the big nester's roar behind him.

"Wait for us, pardner!"

Phil neck-reined the quivering horse out of the coulee. The animal tasted fresh wind in his nostrils and it covered the ground in long power drives leaving the stench of battle behind.

Each time a hoof struck, it sent pain stabbing through Phil. Yet he clung gamely to the hull, driving the pony harder through the hock-high grass. His brain flamed with a single question. At this moment, just what was happening to Jenny Holm?

AGAINST A thin stand of young elms he made out the one rustic cabin that had been spared the torch. It was the only building on the smoke-veiled horizon, and against the tie-rack stood Jenny's wagon. Ignoring Dulane's guns, he drove the pony into the yard. Soft grass muffled his approach. He dropped from his saddle on the off side, palming his Colt as he moved in.

Jenny's high-keyed voice reached him a few feet from the door. "The shooting has stopped. Your gunfighters have wiped out the families, Dulane!"

The man grunted his answer harshly. "Any shooting was done by nesters. Buell had orders to move 'em out quiet."

"You're lying, Dulane. You promised me—"

His voice snapped—a barbed, deadly sound. "I'm not lying. They're plumb quick on temper—look what they done to Dexter!"

Phil caught a glimpse of the interior and he saw Dulane's hand sweep across a prone body on the plank table. The man's uncovered chest was horribly crushed from the impact of Maloney's pitchfork, and here on the table Phil saw also his own professional bag. They had been working to save the gunman's life.

Dulane was closing in on Jenny. "He's dead," he croaked hoarsely. "God knows how many more cowmen your people butchered."

"Cowmen," she said scornfully. "They were killers!"

"You're the one to pay if you don't hold your bargain, Jenny."

His fingers had reached Jenny's shoulder when Phil hurtled through the door. Phil's voice was a choked scream though he cried only one word, *"Dulane!"*

The cattleman whirled as his wide body shoved sideways from Jenny in one continuous movement. A naked pool of fury slid across his face as he stared at Phil. Then his Colt was drilling lead as fast as he could drop its hammer.

Phil was slow getting off his first shot. Somehow fear for Jenny had brought a weakness over him all at once. He felt a slug run along his ribs bringing its deadening heat. Another pricked at his sleeve. He was conscious his gun had been bucking against the heel of his hand, but the first sign he had that lead had struck was the faltering of Dulane's firing. One last shot plowed the planks and then the big man staggered forward. He died on his feet with a horrible gurgling in his throat.

"Phil!" Jenny screamed hysterically as she came at him. "Phil, what have they done to our people?"

[*Turn To Page* 80]

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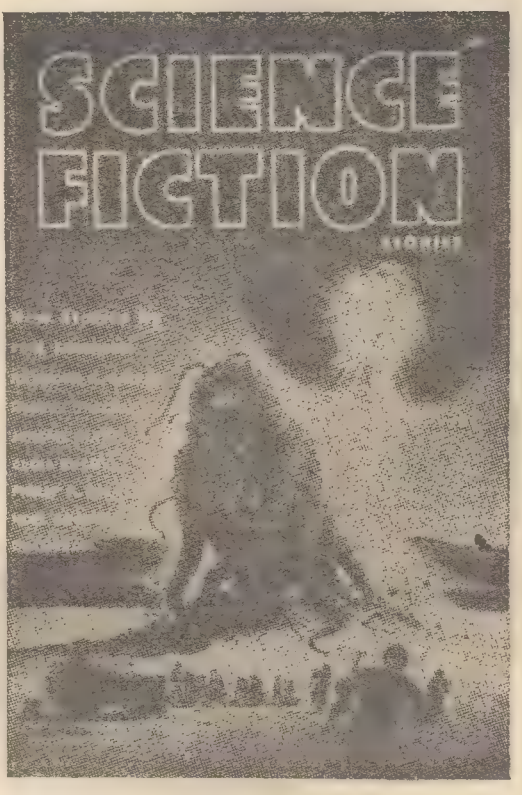

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SPECIAL FEATURE

The Old Bullwhacker

by LAURAN PAINE

AN UNUSUAL form of frontier-life, when the plains were teeming with buffalo and primitive men, red and white, and the arduous chore of freighting was the sole expedient for progressive trade and news vending, was the oldtime bullwhacker.

It has been said of him that his whip and his oath were both the longest in the history of mankind. It's pretty hard to prove that; but, if there ever was a brotherhood of men, anywhere, who used a longer, more sinister and more efficient, whip than the bullwhacker did, then it appears that someone would have commemorated them. Since no one ever did, it is pretty safe to assume that no whipster, living or dead, ever used as powerful, long or functional a whip as the Western bullwhacker.

As to his oath, suffice to say that—editorial censorship being what it is—the bullwhacker's fabulous, hair-curling and soul-singing oath will quite probably pass into oblivion, along with the Rebel Yell, because of the moral-conscious gentry who shrink back from preserving for posterity the most satisfying, most tongue-twisting, most astounding profanity that any one has ever conceived out of the brilliance of the human think-box. The whip, yes, we can preserve that; but, alas, the tremendous oaths, born out of desperation, vile eloquence, consuming fury and sprinkled liberally with the choice descriptive epithets of two races—frequently more—that, it is a shame to admit, must fade out and pass on, to its own reward, along with its user.

The bullwhacker of the plains came in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Sometimes he was tall and picturesque, with flowing shoulder-length hair and clear, hawk-like eyes; but again, he was frequently a myoptic individual with a filthy hint of flannel underwear—red, at that—showing over the bulge of his paunch and from beneath

a rip in his grimy shirt. Again, he was skinny, red headed, with an unkempt beard that stood out like a walrus' mustache, liberally stained with oily tobacco juice drippings. Or he was an average hombre, with nothing unusual about him, or distinguishing, except his brooding, silent way of watching the hypnotic rumps of his plodding oxen, who served as the inspiration for his ability to create, over the long, tiresome hours and days, colossal oaths that would run, not infrequently, for ten minutes without repeating a single profane word! A neat feat. Try it.

Eight, ten, and sometimes twelve yokes of oxen were coupled to his wagon. When the business demanded it, however, he pulled two wagons—the tongue of the second wagon being passed beneath the undercarriage of the first wagon, and being secured close to the front axle of the first wagon. This was called "close coupling". Naturally it required more oxen, so a double hitch would be lined out. On whichever side of the high seat the bullwhacker favored, close to hand were hung his axe and his rifle. Tied securely on the top of the load, over the great canvases that were lashed over the freight, was his bedroll and immediate possessions. Quite commonly, the things tied up there were everything the bullwhacker had in the world—except, of course, his oaths and his whip.

A 'whacker's whip usually had a stock about three feet long. This was also used as a prod. But the writhing, stinging, popping end of the whip was anywhere from twenty to forty feet long, depending on the 'whacker's likes and ability. It was always made of braided, oiled rawhide and the "stingers" at the end were not infrequently studded with tiny lead shot, split. These were called "persuaders"—and, when properly applied, did a world of persuading.

UNDER THE magic insistence of the whip, a bullwhacker could, in good weather and over sound terrain, make twenty miles a day. This was not an average but it was a goal to strive for. A good bull-team average for one day would be in the neighborhood of twelve to fourteen miles. In view of this monotony, then, it isn't hard to appreciate that the driver had ample time to congitate until he had perfected a unique, wholly distinctive, never repetitive, oath, all his very own, which set him apart from the other drivers; and in rare cases where the 'whacker showed a world of imagination, they earned him grudging admiration from his blisteringly-profane brotherhood.

Perhaps you think I dwell too much on the importance of the 'whacker's oath? Well, no less an authority than General William Tecumseh Sherman—no slouch with a vivid, and livid, stream of vocal abuse, himself—used to tell the story of an officer in his command during the Civil War. The officer was a pious, gentle man, who was astounded the first time he heard a bullwhacker unlimber his wrath, not his whip, on his yokes of oxen.

The indignant officer lit into the 'whacker unmercifully—not with the customary profanity, though—and the driver only sat back and marvelled at the tempest that fought for its strength among a bunch of English words that lacked the descriptive power and rousing potency, a real, he-man, profanity. Finally, tired of the spectacle, the 'whacker got down off his wagon and walked away in disgust. The officer posted notice and issued orders to the wagon-masters that drivers were not, under any circumstances, to use profanity.

Several days went by and the bullwhackers kept their plodding charges closed up on the march. Then it began to rain. The roads became a quagmire of slimy slush, and the wagons repeatedly bogged down. Finally, with four wagons mired down at the same time and the oxen unable to free any of them, the officer in charge of transportation was sent for by the 'whack-

ers themselves. Scenting mutiny, the devout Yankee strode up to the assembled drivers and asked them what they wanted.

"Permission to cuss at them critters, sir; they won't budge a wagon till they're damned well cussed out."

The officer doubted that profanity could induce the oxen to move if prayer couldn't; but, at the insistence of the 'whackers, he agreed on one attempt. A paunchy, grizzled old veteran 'whacker clambered up on the seat, unfurled and popped his whip and proceeded to lash the oxen with his astounding oath for a full ten minutes. The great beasts heaved and strained and fought until they had the wheels moving; then they increased their efforts under the impetus of the profanity, without the whip, until they had the wagon in the clear. This procedure was repeated four times and all four wagons came clear of the heavy gumbo. The officer rescinded his orders and never mentioned the bullwhacker's oath again—although, if he happened to be close when one of them unlimbered, he would wince and ride quickly out of earshot.

So, you see, the oath was as much a part of the bullwhacker as the whip—and in some cases, far more effective. General Sherman himself recognised the merit, and condoned the use of the 'whacker's oath.

The old 'whackers were rugged characters. They consistently operated in hostile Indian territory, and occasionally paid for their arrogance with their lives. They defied the elements and kept to their schedules in spite of wind, sleet, rain, fire, blasting sun or high water. Theirs was a philosophy adopted from the great oxen themselves: Anything that is done slowly, methodically, can be done. Anything.

THE OLD bullwhacker was a proud man. His self-confidence had to be mountainous. Unless he had confidence in his own ability to extricate himself from the devilish dilemmas that plagued him, the overland-freighting business wouldn't have lasted long. He had to be a good veterinarian, an oxen-psychiatrist, a weather-prophet and his own insurance-underwriter. All of these things took time and shrewdness to learn. The weak or vacillating fell by the wayside; but the men who emerged triumphant over the innumerable pitfalls of the trail, became the historic bullwhackers.

They had humor, too. One time, in a camp not far from Council Groves, one 'whacker bet another he could cut a patch off the latter's britches, over the rump, without touching the skin underneath. The wager was a quart of whiskey. The second 'whacker took him up, walked out twenty feet and folded his arms loosely over his chest, his flat, hard derriere turned contemptuously to the bullwhacker with the great whip in his hands. It might not be amiss here to interrupt this saga long enough to point out that one of those whips has been known to double up an oxen in paroxyms of agony when he is struck with it.

At any rate, the bullwhacker measured the distance with canny eye, hefted his whip carefully, spat and began the writhing bodily contortion that set the quivering length of deadly rawhide into motion. For a fraction of a second nothing happened, then, suddenly, an all-time record was established for a free jump. The whip took the required piece of cloth, but it also sliced off a generous slab of haunch. The first bullwhacker threw down his whip in disgust and moaned loudly. "My gawd, I've lost the whiskey!"

The old bullwhacker is gone, as are his huge old wagons and his plodding teams; but in passing he added another page to the colorful, heterogenous history of America's fabled wonderland.

★

"I hurried right up here to pay off Pop's mortgage, but it was gone. You'd bought it, you rat! So I'm going to live in that tent, right next to this soddy of yours, day and night, 'till you sell the ranch back to me!" Tom Hardy could only gulp and stare at this lovely blonde gal, remembering that his fiancee was due to arrive any time, now . . .

The Rise Of Hardy

by GENE AUSTIN

TOM HARDY came out of his soddy at sunrise, stretched sleep out of his muscles, and then blinked his eyes. Then he repeated the blink, because it was obvious he was seeing things. The hallucination was remarkably clear, taking the form of a brand new canvas tent, completely staked out, not a hundred feet from his soddy—where he knew there was really nothing but a patch of bare ground.

While he studied it with amazement, the tent-flap opened and anoth-

er mirage appeared—this time a tall blonde girl, who stretched exactly as he had, looked at him sleepily, and then said clear as a bell, "Hello there, Hardy! Where can I get some wash-water around here?"

Hardy stood rooted to the ground, too astonished to think, and watched the girl yawn and then, with a graceful movement of her hand, lift her mop of hair and let it fall tumbling in waves over silk clothed shoulders. Her blouse was yellow like her hair, and she wore tan jodphurs and shiny brown boots. And she came toward him.

"What's the matter?" She stopped within a few feet and studied him carefully. "Don't you think I'm real?" She laughed at this. "You must sleep like a dead man. I made quite a racket putting up that tent last night." She stretched again and Hardy felt his face reddening; the movement was very uplifting.

"How do you know my name?" Hardy croaked, stepping back a pace. "Who are you and what are you doin' here?"

"One at a time," the girl said coolly. "I know your name because I asked in Terra Lousy; in fact, I know all about you—you must be a stinker. My name's Milly Winters and that ought to explain why I'm here."

Hardy continued to stare at her while this sank in. Milly Winters—Winters. Yes. Winters was the name of the old man who'd bought the ranch previously, before Hardy rode in, bought the mortgage, and started to fix the place up so it was fit for human habitation. The house was in such terrible shape that he'd had to build a soddy or catch pneumonia.... But that didn't explain Milly, and he told her so.

"No, you wouldn't understand, you heartless monster," said Milly. "Imagine—turning an old man out of house and home. I come to town and find my father sweeping out a saloon! Why, he loved this land like a child, you—"

"Now, wait a minute," Hardy said firmly. "I didn't do any such thing. The bank had the mortgage for sale and if I hadn't bought it somebody else would've. I came here looking for a ranch and that's what I got— I think," he added, looking around at the run-down buildings. "I'm sorry about your father, but I understood he had relatives—"

"Me! I'm all he has," Milly said. "I'm a governess—in Austin. I'm poor as a churchmouse— I mean I was, I'm not anymore. I'm filthy rich now—"

"How'd you get rich?"

Milly scowled. "F a r o! Started with ten dollars and ran it up to six thousand in no time— I hurried right up here to pay off Pop's mortgage but it was gone. You'd bought it, you rat! So I'm going to live right in that tent day and night till you sell it back to me—and from what I picked up about you in Terra Lousy that could make you mighty uncomfortable."

"Well, I ain't sellin'," Hardy announced. "I happen to be engaged to a very lovely and virtuous girl, who lives in St. Louis; and we're goin' to get married and live here—soon as I get it fixed up."

Milly snorted. "Virtuous, h u h? Well, I'm not! I'm—I'm a loose woman! What'll your virtuous girl-friend think when she finds out about me?"

"She's very sensible," said Hardy. "She trusts me."

"I tell you it's Pop's heart and soul! You will sell, won't you?"

"No," Hardy said...

HE SPENT the morning hammering and sawing on the roof of the house, ignoring, as best as he could, the activities of Milly Winters, who tried several times to lure him to the ground. He remained steadfast, and each time the siren called, thought savagely of St. Louis and Miss Ophelia Deckson, his betrothed. He had written Ophelia about the ranch, and she had written back, and

said that it sounded "charming." He was certain that Ophelia would not approve of his selling it back to the Winters.

Ophelia was a very proper girl, and Hardy had been assured by his Aunt Matilda—who had brought him up and brought them together—that he could not do better. It worried him to consider what Ophelia would think if she discovered about Milly; but he figured if he just kept on ignoring Milly, she'd go away and leave him alone. Milly's conscience would surely catch up with her, for even a sinful girl should see the impropriety of sleeping only a hundred feet from a man she was not married to—and with no one else around.

He *did* feel sorry for them. He had not know old Sam Winters had had to take a swamping job, and he knew how a man could get attached to a place. But there was Ophelia and Aunt Matilda—

At noon there appeared on the horizon a two-horse team pulling a buckboard loaded down with various boxes and crates. The driver was a peculiar-looking stranger. He was peculiar-looking in that he did not look like a driver. Hardy could not help watching as the wagon drove up and stopped before Milly's tent. The driver got slowly to the ground, and he and Milly had a long conversation, during which they went into the tent and could not be seen. The driver was dressed flashily, and wore patent-leather shoes and a black, flat-crowned Stetson. He also wore a Colt .45 under his frock coat. When they came out of the tent Milly proceeded to unload the wagon while the dressy gent stood by and gave directions. When all the boxes had been stacked, there was another sojourn in the tent, after which the gent remounted the wagon and drove off, giving Hardy a profound inspection as he did so.

The sun was hot as a poker and Hardy decided to postpone working on the roof. He crawled down, went to his soddy, and partook of a can of beans. He then rolled a cigarette, stepped outside, and saw Milly broiling a large steak over an open fire.

"Come on over and have some!" she yelled.

"No, thank you," Hardy returned stiffly. After a few minutes he could no longer bear the delicious odor that came to him through the still air. He decided he would go into Terra Lousy and get some nails; he went to the pole-corral and saddled a bay...

By the time he got to town he was so miserably hot he decided to disregard Aunt Matilda's warnings against strong drink and have a beer in the saloon, which had no other name than "Drinks of All Kinds Sold Here."

Hardy draped the bay's reins over the hitch rail and entered guiltily. The saloon was cool and dark, but when his eyes became somewhat accustomed to the gloom he observed that the flashily-dressed stranger, who had brought the wagon to his ranch, was standing not far down the bar. The stranger was in earnest conversation with a rough-looking man in range clothes. Hardy ordered his beer and sipped slowly. He hoped Ophelia never heard about it.

HE HAD the beer half down when he was interrupted by a loud cough and turned to see the flashy gent standing beside him. "Howdy do," the gent said. "My name's Monty Carter— I believe you're Hardy, the one that bought the Winters' ranch?"

"That's right," Hardy said. "What's all that stuff you brought out there?"

"Provisions for Milly," Carter said sadly. "Listen, Hardy, how much did you put up for that mortgage?"

"One thousand dollars," Hardy said; "it ain't much of a ranch."

"True, true," said Carter, shaking his head. "My boy, you can make a killing here. I happen to know that

Milly'd pay at least fifteen hundred. Obviously—"

"Sorry, I ain't sellin'," Hardy said firmly.

Before Hardy could turn back to his beer, the stranger in range clothes, who had apparently been listening in on the conversation, forced himself in front of Carter and said angrily, "Listen, you two-bit jackass, sell that damn fool woman that hunk of ground and do it quick, or I'll—"

"Here, here," Carter said soothingly. "Hardy, pay no attention to Mr. Knepper here. He has no patience; I'm sure that after thinking it over you'll see the advantages of—"

"Save your wind," Hardy said. "My mind's made up." He looked with considerable trepidition at Knepper's hips, where hung two Frontier Colts, but stubbornly refused to waver an inch.

Knepper started to swear, and for an instant Hardy thought he'd go for one of the guns; but instead he turned and swore some more at Carter, then headed for the door. "What I said goes," he growled, just before the batwings swung shut on him.

Hardy was sweating; Carter also looked slightly pale. Carter said worriedly, "I'm afraid Knepper also means what he said, Hardy. A dangerous man, Knepper."

"What's he got to do with it?" Hardy demanded. "In fact, how do you fit in here? All this trouble over a little piece—"

"Exactly. Allow me to explain. You see, Hardy, Knepper is not a cowman, even if he does look like one. He owns a gambling-house in Austin—the one, incidentally, where Milly won six thousand dollars. Knepper isn't one to let that kind of money slip through his fingers. He's threatened me—same as he did you, unless I get Milly back to the gambling-house in order that she can lose the money back to Knepper. I explained it's impossible to get her out of here until the ranch is back in her father's hands—poor old gentleman. Knepper is even willing to lose the fifteen hundred it woud cost, but no more. I'm afraid your stubbornness will bring his wrath upon you, Hardy. Knepper is capable of almost any kind of violence..."

HARDY FELT as if someone was twisting a large screw into his stomach, but he persisted. "I asked where you fit in?"

Carter studied his fingernails. "I'm to be Milly's husband, Hardy. With her luck and my brains, our prospects are unlimited—provided we don't get tangled up with any more Kneppers."

Hardy looked at him with disgust, killed his beer, and stepped for the doors without another word. Outside, he noted that the weather was changing. Clouds were forming on the horizon, a slight breeze made fluttering wings out of the leather chaps of a passing cowboy. And about half a mile up the road, a cloud of dust announced the imminent arrival of the bi-weekly stagecoach.

Hardy started for his bay, and then noticed that Knepper had not left—the man was lounging a few yards down the street against the wall of the harness shop. He didn't come forward to speak to Hardy, but pointed up the road with a splinter toothpick.

"That stage's layin' over five hours; I want you to be on it when it leaves. Which means you got five hours to make a sale on that greasy-sack spread of yours. You better hustle."

"Go straight to hell," Hardy said. The words came out before he could think.

Knepper's eyes narrowed. "Not for awhile, yet. Anyway, I'll ride with you when you head back; maybe I can persuade you."

Hardy's heart was hammering. He remembered the nails he'd come in for and started up toward the general store. By that time the stage was

careening up the street and pulled up with a big fuss and hollering in front of the station. Hardy paused to watch, and then lost his breath completely. A familiar feathered hat appeared at the window of the stage, a sharp nose. A trunk came off the top. There were impatient orders and then, there on the boardwalk of Terra Lousy, stood Aunt Matilda and the lovely Ophelia.

His legs turned to cheese, but he somehow got up to them. There was a dusty embrace—a very short one. Aunt Matilda was complaining. "Hot, bumpy, miserable—ghastly."

Ophelia was sweating and grimy and did not look so lovely at that. "We thought we'd surprise you—a lark, but it's awful. What a terrible town! Why are the people so dirty? Take us to the ranch at once; I can't bear it any longer."

Hardy thought of Milly in her tent, also of the condition of the ranch. He was sick. "I can't; it isn't ready. You'll have to stay at the hotel."

He pointed at that proud edifice, two stories of stained, weathered wood and dirty windows, and Ophelia began to sob. "I shouldn't have come out here. I know it! I shouldn't have—"

Aunt Matilda was more firm. "Well, you fool if we must stay in that stable, pick up our trunk and get us a room! Have you lost your wits completely?"

Hardy stumbled to the trunk, wrestled it up, and staggered across the street with it, the ladies following and entertaining him with a continuous stream of degrading remarks about the beauties of Terra Lousy.

FIFTEEN minutes later he emerged. He had had to promise that if the weather cleared he'd return and take them to the ranch, no matter what its condition. Aunt Matilda was certain it could be no worse than the hotel.

He got on the bay and started out, the steadily growing wind peppering dust against his cheek. He had forgotten about Knepper, deep in these other troubles. And he was angry at himself. For some reason he had sprouted an affection for this terrible little town; he didn't like the way they talked about it—and the way they talked about him.

He hadn't got fifty yards before Knepper was riding beside him on a big black he'd apparently borrowed at the livery stable. His scowling hulk was at least some protection from the wind. Hardy tried to ignore the big man's endless display of new cuss words. He tried to figure it out. There were blind alleys everywhere. The stubborn Milly, Ophelia and his Aunt—if he could have got out of that, it would have been a miracle, but there remained Knepper.

Hardy was no gunhand, not even a fair one. Knepper was plainly an expert. Even if he would have had a chance in a shootout, he was at present unarmed.

Squinting ahead at the clump of cottonwoods that marked the south boundary of his range, a second wave of resentment swept through him. It was strangely exhilarating. Before Terra Lousy, he had not had even the guts to be resentful.

He spurred his bay suddenly and got to the cottonwoods before Knepper, but the big man had had his eyes open. Hardy had some sort of a stand in mind, probably foolish, but as he wheeled his horse something hard smashed against his forehead. He went out of the saddle abruptly; Knepper dismounted and stood over him. "Still won't sell?"

"No, damn you."

"Okay," Knepper grinned, holstering the gun he'd used as a club. "I got another idea. Why should I lose fifteen hundred? But I'll see you later, me waddy."

Knepper turned and spanked the bay, sent it trotting on toward the ranch. Then the big man mounted and spat down at Hardy. "Have a nice stroll."

He was off, following the bay. And it was several minutes before Hardy

managed to get to his feet and send a few adjectives of his own after him. His head thumped maddeningly. He wondered what Knepper was up to now, what he'd meant by the "see you later."

Terra Lousy was the closer place. But Hardy set his chin and started to trudge toward the ranch, fighting the wind to stay on his feet...

He got there in about an hour. For some reason, he had expected to find it in a turmoil, or at least a few dynamite charges going off here and there. But the place was intensely quiet.

His bay was munching grass by the corral. Knepper or his horse were nowhere to be seen. There was no activity around either the soddy, the barn, or Milly's tent. He stood, puzzled, and then the wind died down a little. He heard a quiet but staccato sobbing coming from the tent, and started to run.

MILLY WAS sitting on the ground inside the tent, crying industriously. She began to wail when she saw him. "He came, poked me in the nose—and he took my money!"

Milly took her handkerchief away long enough to display the dripping nose and let out a mournful shriek that struck to the very bottom of Hardy's heart. He found himself crouching beside her and patting her comfortingly on the back. "All of your money?"

"Every red cent. Poor Pop, doomed to a life of swabbing up saloon floors...and I'm not filthy rich, any more. But I don't care about myself, it's just—" She looked up at him suddenly and scowled. "I guess you're satisfied now, you rat! You can marry your old Ophelia and—"

Hardy was thinking the same thing; he stood up. It was perfect. Knepper would probably head back for his old grounds, where the law would leave him alone, and Milly would have to get off his ranch and marry Carter. And he could bring Aunt Matilda and Ophelia—

It rang hollow. When he thought of Matilda and Ophelia he got that sensation back again. The hair stood up on the back of his neck. If they figured they could push him around—damn them, if they didn't like it here they could go back to where they came from. He scowled also.

"Listen, you," he said, "that Knepper can't push us around either. I might be crazy, but I'm goin' to take out after him and—"

He rushed out of the tent, with only a quick look at Milly's surprised face. He ran to the soddy and got the Smith & Wesson he'd bought for snake-shooting purposes. He buckled it on, lit for the bay, mounted, and took off toward Terra Lousy. He had a vague idea that it was where he would meet Knepper.

The wind was still blowing. There were drops of rain in it. He bent low against the neck of the bay. And he felt a feeling coming up from the bottom of his stomach; it told him he was insane to be trying a thing like this, to be fighting the very things he'd wanted only that morning. And the fact remained, the undeniable truth, that he was still not a match for Knepper, mad or not.

He slowed down a little. He was coming to the border of his ranch again, to the clump of cottonwoods. Then he pulled up sharply as a gun cracked and a bullet tugged his Stetson off his head and sent it sailing away on the wind. The horse reared; he fought it down. And Knepper stepped out from behind the trees.

Knepper was grinning behind the two Colts clenched in his big fists. "You double-damned fool! I figured you might want to tail me. I circled and waited, so's you wouldn't have to ride so far. Now keep your hands up and get down off that bronc."

HARDY DID as he was told. He stood spread-legged a few feet from Knepper, who was obviously enjoying his position as dictator. Knepper had also lost his hat to the wind;

his stringy hair stood out raggedly in the growing gale and added to his grinning ugliness.

The wind was going mad. Knepper raised his voice, but it still sounded faint to Hardy. "If that was your gal got off the stage back in Terra Lousy, boy, you ought to appreciate what I'm goin' to do."

Hardy was recalling some of the cussing he'd heard that day and applying it to himself. He shouldn't have tried such a damnfool thing; he should never have done anything at all without asking his aunt and Ophelia...

Out of the corner of his eye he saw something coming toward them from his right. It was a mass of tumbleweed, carried along by the wind at a furious speed and one of a dozen he'd seen that day. He got a quick and desperate thought. He kept his hands up as high as he could reach, let his face show fear and said something begging.

Knepper's eyes were riveted on him; he could almost see the arm muscles tightening to pull the trigger, and Knepper unconsciously did as Hardy had hoped—took an involuntary step also to stay near him. The tumbleweed got there at the same time. It plowed into Knepper's feet, tangled around his legs. Knepper was off-balance for a second.

Hardy dived for him, hearing the whine of slugs above him. He got his arms around Knepper's waist and his weight carried him to the ground. Knepper was using a gun as a club. Hardy winced as it came in contact with his elbow. He hit Knepper in the windpipe with the side of his hand. Knepper rolled and clouted the gun around wildly; he broke out of Hardy's grip. He was twisting around when Hardy got his Smith & Wesson out and shot him in the temple. Then Hardy lay flat on the ground and waited for his breath to come back.

In a while he heard hoofbeats. He raised his head. Milly came charging up on one of his horses, riding bareback and hanging on desperately. Milly leaped off and knelt beside him.

"I wanted to stop you," said Milly, "but I couldn't catch you. You must be crazy—what do you want to get my money back for; now I'll just keep pesting you."

"Won't do you any good." Hardy looked at her closely. "I been thinkin' while I was lyin' here. You ain't the girl for Carter, Milly."

"I'm not?" Milly said. She did not seem too surprised.

"No, you're not; you're the ranch type. Now, Carter's the city type. I got an idea that if I introduced him to Ophelia she'd forget all about me. Why, I bet they'd take him to St. Louis and make a regular gigolo out of him. What do you think?"

"But what about me?" Milly said.

"You just stay there in that tent. When I get that house fixed, you can move in there if you want—and bring the old man with you. Yep, do that."

"But," said Milly, "we'd have to get married."

Hardy considered. "I reckon we would," he said. "But I wonder what Matilda'd think if we didn't—"

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A Hollywood Murder Mystery

THERE WAS BLOOD ON THE SCRIPT

by Hal K. Wells

is but one of the many unforgettable tales in the November issue of

FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

SPECIAL FEATURE

Strikes of Misfortune

by NAN BAKER

FATE IS often unkind to discoverers. Fate was particularly unkind to some of these during the gold-rush era. Just as those first clods of red earth were washed away from the precious ore, so was wealth, and sometimes life itself, washed from those who first gleaned it from the rocks.

The fact is well-known that James Marshall, made the gold discovery at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, on Jan. 24, 1848. Not so well known is the story of this discovery's aftermath and how it wrecked Sutter's financial and mental status. Even Marshall reaped nothing more than the slight glory of having been the discoverer. Yet, he was far better off than Sutter, who lost his own kingdom and the dreams built around it.

At first, pleased with their find, James Marshall had plans of great profits coming from the gold. Those plans were shattered by the immediate invasion of gold-crazy hordes. Fearing exactly what happened, Captain John Sutter tried to hide their discovery from the outside world. Suddenly, however, it was out and he found himself slipping from head of his rancho, to the level of a frenzied wreck, half-mad with the hopeless task of trying to hold together his property, and to drive out the invaders. He applied to all the courts in the land and had hopes in his lawyers to the very end. But the squatters held strong and he died in poverty, having lost 11 leagues of California land, a flour-mill, sawmill, tannery, 1000 acres of wheat with the expected output of 40,000 bushels of grain, 8000 head of cattle (a small portion of which were sold by miners for $60,000) 1000 head of sheep, and two or three hundred Indian workers who deserted.

Others have died with the discovery of fantastic wealth. In 1848, a New Yorker by the name of W. S. Body first set foot on the ore-rich soil of California. In 1859, he and four partners crossed the Sonora Pass and traveled northeast in search of new diggings. On their way to the west, they struck favorable Placer diggings in the hills to the east of the Sierra Nevada Range.

In March of 1860, they had settled down to exploring their claims when Body, and a partner named Taylor, struck out for the mining-settlement of Monoville for supplies. They were overtaken by a severe snow storm and Body died by the wayside. A new mining-settlement then grew up around the remainder of the group, and the Body claim panned out to be a great strike. The town was named after him; usage changed it to Bodie, and before the claim ran dry, yielded some $25,000,000 in rich gold ore.

Similar was the case of Alan Grosh and his brother Hosea. The Grosh brothers were the first to stumble on the huge silver deposits of the Virginia City area. Hosea died before they could return to civilization, and Alan and a Canadian youth started back over the mountains. The date was November 1, 1857, and Grosh had

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Big Muskrat had it all figured. "Teeth not rattle when winter come, or hole in stomach where food supposed to be. Me have corn, beans, squash and onions. Me have cabin for winter. But — me no have Song-at-Dawn."

A Feast For Unquaha

by LON WILLIAMS

BIG MUSKRAT, up at dawn, built a log fire in his snug stone fireplace and went outside to watch its smoke rise and waver against October's clean blue Western sky. This was a trying time for homesteader Muskrat, what with loneliness in his heart and snow piled high on peaks of Idaho and Wyoming mountains. Smoke rising from a log cabin, built by Muskrat's own strong hands because blood of a French grandfather urged thrift and shelter and security. provided a right setting for matrimony, love and warm companionship during winter winds and big snows. Those things he needed sorely, but did not have; not yet.

His cabin door opened and his summertime no-pay boarder came out and cast his one good eye upward. Pierre Heyfron was French, old and crabbed. Claimed he was half-great-uncle to Big Muskrat, whose long-dead grandfather was Jean Heyfron, a trapper like Pierre.

"Time's come," Heyfron muttered. "Beaver and mink and fox is yearnin' to be caught and skinned."

Muskrat would have dreaded this time of year, when Heyfron would be loading his pack and heading for fur country, to be gone until spring. But now his regrets were small. "Next summer you will camp elsewhere, Pierre Heyfron."

"What's that?"

"It is squaw time for me," said Muskrat. "Strong, prosperous man that I am, knowing in myself that which speaks of a woman's company, papooses, days of laughter to be remembered when I'm old. There won't be room for you, Pierre, half-great-uncle that you claim to be."

"Ah!" Pierre grunted. "You break my heart, kinsman." Heyfron was strong, of good size, yet he had to squint upward to see Big Muskrat's handsome face. "Have you picked her out, grandson of Jean Heyfron?"

"Muskrat will marry Song-at-Dawn, daughter of great chief Unquaha."

"Ah!" Pierre grunted again. Daughter of his old friend Unquaha. That was good. He and Unquaha would have themselves a cabin on Big Muskrat's farm, eat well, sleep late, work none at all. To oppose was to encourage a man in love. "Your grandf'er would not rest, knowing he had a grandson as tame as Muskrat. Marry a squaw for summer, he would say. Go it alone by winter. Next summer, another squaw. I reckon if a Shoshone hunter hadn't back-shot him in his prime, he'd have had no end of squaw widders between Bighorn and Salmon rivers."

To Muskrat, Grandf'er Heyfron deserved to be remembered for his independence and courage, not for his much-marrying. Muskrat was one-fourth French by one of Grandf'er Heyfron's marriages for a season. He was one-half Shoshone-Bannock by gift of a half-breed Indian maid to his half-breed father. By white-man reckoning, he was Indian. Of his white blood and intellect he was proud, but it was his Indian blood that turned his thoughts to Song-at-Dawn, young, lively, full-blood Bannock.

Over a small stove he prepared a good breakfast for Pierre, ate with him what Muskrat optimistically regarded as a farewell-forever meal, helped him pack, and told him goodby. Afterwards Muskrat saddled his best horse and leading his next-best, took off for chief Unquaha's reservation village. Quick to make up his mind, he was as quick to act upon his decision; if it was marrying time, it was marrying time, so why put if off?

UNQUAHA lived in a tipi of picture-painted buffalo hides, surrounded by other decorated tipis where his daughter and other relatives found shelter. Still other tipis formed a two-acre square, where kettles were being hung and firewood collected for a celebration. Muskrat dismounted outside this square, hitched his horses in a scrub-pine gulch and strode straight to Unquaha's dwelling.

Two Indian braves stood in his way. "You not wanted here."

Big Muskrat looked them over tolerantly. He could easily have bashed their heads together. "Big Muskrat come to see great chief Unquaha."

"Not see him. Chief Unquaha busy."

Through an opening made by a turned back flap Muskrat caught a glimpse of Unquaha and three or four venerable Bannocks. Muskrat lifted his strong, eloquent voice. He would be heard despite dutiful doorkeepers. "Muskrat have good log cabin, fine chimney, much land, many cattle, many horses, much food. Muskrat need squaw to keep him warm, cook his food, raise papooses. Muskrat come to ask great chief Unquaha for his beautiful daughter, she of his winter years. Muskrat ask for Song-at-Dawn."

Both guards shook their heads. "Song-at-Dawn much spoke for. Muskrat not see great chief."

"Muskrat will stay until he can see great chief." He had turned on his heel to stride away when before

him stood a big Indian with uncommonly thick unbraided hair and folded arms.

"Me Shaggy Horse, brave hunter, friend of chief Unquaha. Me have Song-at-Dawn for squaw."

"Not so," declared Muskrat. "Shaggy Horse live in tipi. Shiver from cold and teeth rattle when north winds blow. Muskrat have fine, warm, strong cabin. Muskrat not fear big snows, not have to hide in canyon from storm and starve before land is green again. You stand on hill, look down in valley and see smoke rise from Muskrat's log cabin chimney and there you say, live Muskrat and Song-at-Dawn. Not hungry. Not cold. Not afraid. But warm, happy, even when winds howl loud and snows drift high."

"Shaggy Horse not want all that. Shaggy Horse brave, strong hunter. Wrap squaw in bear skin. Keep warm with blankets of beaver, wolf, buffalo."

From among those who had gathered to listen, a third contender stepped forth. Try-Again-Nofire was a tall Indian who moved on noiseless feet. "You not have Song-at-Dawn," said Nofire to both of them. "Nofire have her. Me great provider. Not hunter, like shaggy Horse. Not dirt-digger, like Muskrat. Me great go-gettum-where-findum."

And old Indian came from Unquaha's tipi. "Make much noise. Go."

Muskrat chose his own direction. He came to where squaws and maids were gathering firewood beside huge iron kettles and suspending kettles from chains fastened to scaffolds.

He spoke to a squaw. "Why all this?"

"Muskrat not know?" When he shook his head, she explained. "Muskrat live alone too much, too far from village. Day after first night of full moon is birthday of chief Unquaha. Make feast. Two days. First day, Try-Again-Nofire will bring meat for big feast. Second day, Shaggy Horse will bring meat for big feast. Chief Unquaha. Make feast. Two days. First day, Try-Again-Nofire will bring meat for big feast. Second day, Shaggy Horse will bring meat for big feast. Chief Unquaha give Song-at-Dawn to best provider."

"No," shouted a venerable Redskin, striding importantly from Unquaha's tipi. "Three days of celebration."

Muskrat's self-confidence took a fall. He had talked too loud in front of Unquaha's tipi. Now it was going to cost him something. "Why three days? How old is great chief Unquaha, that he should have three days of feasting?"

Unquaha's emissary folded his arms and looked haughtily at Muskrat. He spoke in Bannock-Shoshone tongue. "Unquaha, great chief of Shoshones, old as many moons. How old, he does not know, but has seen many snows, and every year after last full moon before winter, chief Unquaha have birthday. This is special time because his last daughter, and fairest of all to look upon, is ready to be given in honorable marriage. Three suitors have claimed this most prized of all gifts. There will, therefore, be three days of feasting. You, Muskrat, will be meat provider for last of those three days. It is Unquaha's command."

Now was it so? What would Grandf'er Heyfron have said to that? In his herd of fine cattle, Muskrat had a prize-winning steer, a fat whiteface that took blue ribbon as a yearling at Uinta County Fair in Wyoming. No squaw was worth that much. "There will be two days of feasting," Muskrat announced haughtily. "Muskrat go home."

"Muskrat will make feast for great chief Unquaha," his emissary said sternly.

Muskrat, frowning, walked away. A crowd had gathered, bucks, squaws, young ones. Jeers and laughs pursued Muskrat. He was a man who talked big and acted little, they said. A man stingy with his beef, potatoes, pumpkins, beans. A man who did squaw work, lived in a house like an old, sick Mandan. A man not all face like

a true Bannock, but dressed up in pants, buckskin jacket and shoes.

IN HIS PROUD independence, Muskrat was immune to jeers. He walked with his big shoulders back, his stout chin high, mighty arms swinging. When kettles and taunters were well behind him, another sound smote his ear softly—moccasined feet of one who ran lightly, voice of one who spoke gently.

"Do not go away in anger, brave one. You are right in not making feast for all these lazy Bannocks. Take much food. But for me, you would make feast, would you not, big brave? For Song-at-Dawn you would kill prize steer, make barbecue, show Bannocks what good provider you are, make all squaws and maids envy Song-at-Dawn when she is married to Big Muskrat."

No other sound was so enchanting as a maid's gentle voice. No other prospect could be so alluring as endearing arms and warm, near presence when arctic blizzards stampeded down upon fields and sheds and a cabin's strong roof. Yet he walked straight on toward his hidden horses.

Unquaha's daughter ran a little ahead of him, that he might see her, admire her slender, graceful form, her doeskin, beaded pants and jacket, her jeweled moccasins, her long braids, her head band of red cloth and redbird feather.

Nor could he help but see her. She was like a fawn that danced upon a green place, like a flower that nodded in a gentle wind.

"Tomorrow," she said, "Shaggy Horse will go to Wyoming mountains to hunt for elk. Will take three pack horses, bring back many elk. Tomorrow, too, Try-Again-Nofire will go to Pocatello to steal from white men. Will bring back much stolen food. Nofire and Shaggy Horse provide big feast. My father, great chief Unquaha, eater of much food, will give Song-at-Dawn to one of them. Muskrat be sorry then; Muskrat be lonesome all winter. Maybe Song-at-Dawn be sorry, too."

There was sense in this pretty maid's head, indeed there was. Muskrat looked back. They had come almost to his horses. Jeering Bannocks no longer followed. Maybe Song-at-Dawn had smiled upon Nofire and Shaggy Horse—how could he know? But she smiled upon him when he stopped, and there was a sweetness in her spritely eyes which told him—made him believe—she was for him only.

He caught her shoulders in his strong hands. "All this big-eat business very foolish. One man should not work all summer and give away all his food for one big gobble-gobble. You come with me—now. I bring horse for you. My cabin is warm. Always, long time ago, you like me best. When I come to chief Unquaha's village, you smile at me. You follow me, when you are little, and you accept my presents. You do not like shaggy Horse then, nor Try-Again-Nofire; it is Big Muskrat who makes corn grow, barley for many cattle, potatoes, beans pumpkins, peppers, onions—for Song-at-Dawn and papooses."

"I would go, yes," she declared, a tiny pain in her lovely eyes, "but my father would be sad. I am to be given, he says. I would not choose wisely, being a maid, empty-headed at that. Yet chief Unquaha loves me much; he would find for me a good provider, good days and bad, and one who would not beat me too much."

"Then ride with me," said Muskrat fervently.

"But, no."

"Let me show you what a fine provider Muskrat is."

"That Song-at-Dawn knows already."

"You see my wagon, horses, cattle, good land that great white father says is mine and for my papooses after me, my store of good things, my cabin in a sheltered valley, smoke rising from my chimney. Then you can say to

great chief Unquaha that Muskrat is a good provider."

Empty-headed or not, she was lured and ensnared by temptation. "Me—I go. We slip away now, but hurry back, before great chief Unquaha find out and be angry."

That was to Muskrat's notion. He took her hand to lead her. "Come. You see what Muskrat have for you, and you will speak well to chief Unquaha. Maybe you not want to come back at all."

But they had not reckoned with Shaggy Horse and Try-Again-Nofire, who stepped from ambush and confronted Big Muskrat, conspirators to do him grave bodily harm.

"We hear," said Shaggy Horse, scowling. "Song-at-Dawn not marry dirt-digger."

"Not marry bean-planter," declared Nofire.

"Not marry corn-planter," declared Shaggy Horse.

"Not marry thin-skin who must live in house," declared Nofire.

Muskrat tensed for what he saw coming, an adversary inching to either side of him, their fists closed hard, eyes watchful. They came, each with a panther leap, but smashed each other as Muskrat stepped from between them. He did not wait for their disentanglement, but waded in and jolted Shaggy Horse's rugged jaw with a terrific wallop. Shaggy Horse went down, and his eyes rolled crazily. Muskrat went for Nofire, whose shifty feet carried him evasively to right and left. He was still unscathed when Shaggy Horse got up and swung at Muskrat's left ear, missing by an inch, but jarring him anyhow. With Muskrat's attention diverted for a second, Nofire came in with a diving leap at Muskrat's legs. They had him then, with Nofire hugging his legs and Shaggy Horse beating his face, which Muskrat could only half-protect with his arms. He went down and rolled onto his back. By good fortune, he saw a chance to booger Nofire's chin with a quick knee jolt. It worked, blood spilling from an inch-long cut as Nofire relaxed his hold. By another maneuver, not all luck, Muskrat doubled his legs and shoved his white-man shoes into Shaggy Horse's middle, looping him into a summersault, jarring a grunt out of him, and springing to his feet to meet him man to man.

None of this was to Song-at-Dawn's liking. Especially did she not like seeing two bucks attack one. Feverishly she searched for a weapon, at length found a hefty pineknot which wood gatherers had overlooked because it was almost buried beneath pine needles. Fighters were kicking trash all around her, two of them trading fist blows, Nofire crouching for another leg attack. Song-at-Dawn swung her pineknot bludgeon at Shaggy Horse's head with enough force to have knocked a grizzly bear cuckoo. Because Shaggy Horse was not holding still, she missed him. She hit Muskrat instead, a disastrous thump behind his right ear. Muskrat fell limply and lay still.

Shaggy Horse looked down at him, then at Song-at-Dawn. Ah, this was all right. She had made her choice; Shaggy Horse felt extra special good. "Song-at-Dawn like Shaggy Horse; make him fine squaw."

"Not so," interposed a haughty objecter. "Nofire still here; there be two feast days yet."

So! Now with Big Muskrat in deep sleep, why should Shaggy Horse allow a thief like Nofire to question his supremacy? Craftily he conceded Nofire's point and then, with Nofire relaxing his guard, caught his right wrist and proceeded to down him and beat his face into a mass of swelled eyes and bloody lips. Song-at-Dawn, frightened, ran away, and when Shaggy Horse found that Nofire also slept, he strode off to pack up for his distant great hunt.

WHEN MUSKRAT'S light came on again, it was a twilight sort, streaked, jagged star-like, much confusing. He lay where he had fallen,

but around him were a score of excited squaws, numerous young ones, and chief Unquaha's medicine man who made impressive signs and mumbled powerful mumbo-jumbo. All of these gawkers looked distorted to Muskrat, mumbo-jumbo was never to his liking, and though he searched in clearing light his roving eyes found not that which they sought most eagerly. Song-at-Dawn had disappeared.

He sat up and rubbed his throbbing head. He remembered his recent adversaries and tensed for resumption of hostilities, but Shaggy Horse and Nofire likewise had departed. Having no interest in squaws and young ones and no faith in medicine-man gyrations and spirit talk, he pushed himself up, unsteadily walked to his horses, mounted after his third effort, and rode away to his cabin, to his stone chimney with its haze of rising smoke—to solitude and loneliness.

All of that day he regarded himself as a very sick man, but next morning headache had merged with anger, bewilderment had yielded to a pressing, unrelenting and to him a wholly honorable necessity for revenge. Remembering that Shaggy Horse was to leave that day for Wyoming mountains to hunt elk, he saddled up and rode ten hard miles to Unquaha's village. But it was only to find that Shaggy Horse had left by moonlight, long before dawn.

Young bucks sat in front of tipis, trying to warm themselves by sunlight. They looked up at Muskrat on his big horse and twisted their mouths at one another. One of them said to Muskrat, "Great chief Unquaha hear about fight, how Shaggy Horse beat both Muskrat and Nofire. Great chief think Shaggy Horse make fine son for Unquaha."

He heard more than that, all of which he gave no mind. Try-Again-Nofire was first big-feed provider. Nofire had gone with two horses to white man's town of Pocatello.

Muskrat had to choose between two trips; one to Pocatello, one to Wyoming's mountains. To Wind River Mountains, land of plenty elk, was many, many miles. Not so many miles, though, to Uinta county, where Muskrat had proved himself a great farmer and prize-winner—and learned a lot, too. He was in Uinta county before dark and talking with a deputy in Sheriff Bockfinger's office.

"Me Big Muskrat, half-breed Bannock, good farmer, good citizen, honest Indian. Want permit to hunt elk in Wind River elk country."

"No," he was promptly told by this hard-faced deputy. "Wyoming does not permit elk hunting. You go back to Idaho and eat agency beef before you get heaved into a pokey. And don't come back here either."

"Um!" grunted Muskrat. "Not fair. You let Shaggy Horse hunt elk in Wind River country; ought to let me hunt."

"What's that! Shaggy Horse, eh? You clear out of here, Muskrat. We'll take care of Shaggy Horse, you bet."

On his smiling way home, Muskrat rode by Pocatello-Pigeon Gap stage road. A Pocatello stage stopped at Sink Creek to change horses.

"Heap big Injun," its squint-eyed driver said, giving Muskrat a scornful once-over.

"Me good Indian," said Muskrat. "You got Bannock county sheriff with you?"

"Now why would I have Sheriff Schofield with me, huh?"

"Not know why. Me look for bad Indian, Try-Again-Nofire. Him gone to Pocatello to make big steal."

"You don't say! Well, wait till old Schoffy gets wind of that."

He spat and went about his business, and Muskrat resumed his long homeward ride. His anger toward Shaggy Horse and Nofire abated rapidly as he rode. At his cabin once more he was feeling good, anticipating that sweet flavor and fullness of retribution that would lie in wait for his wicked enemies.

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In Pocatello, Nofire sat peaceably on a sunny store porch and watched for something to steal. His horses were concealed in a Snake Diver meadow where he could easily reach them. As nothing hopeful showed up, he walked back and forth, dodging riders and stage coaches, avoiding white men with mean looks.

Just before sundown he stood in front of a small frame house with painted pictures on a large board. "What this?" he asked a white man, whose smooth, kind-looking face and long-tailed coat proclaimed a benevolent spirit.

"This is a theater. They're playing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* tonight."

"Um!" grunted Nofire. Painted with other creatures were two huge dogs. Nofire was not interested in Uncle Tom's cabin, but he could easily be friends with Uncle Tom's dogs.

He faded out, spent some time with his horses, watered them, tethered them at a new feeding spot, saddled one of them. An hour later he crept down from Pocatello leading two friendly fat Great Danes which he had stolen from Uncle Tom, whoever Uncle Tom might have been—a detail that troubled Nofire none at all. He promptly cut two dog throats, roped his booty on his pack horse, and by sunrise of first feast day, he was in Unquaha's village. Immediately he was a center of attraction, recipient of congratulations from young bucks, an object of adoring looks from Bannock maidens.

So long as he could keep awake, that long he savored great glory. Squaws who skinned and carved his Great Danes marveled at how big and fat they were, how there was enough meat on their bones to make stew for all of Unquaha's band—two hundred, counting all sizes and ages. Whether it was smell of dog stew or sounds of galloping horses that first penetrated his consciousness, Nofire was not sure. It was to both facts that he awoke in his tipi and came out to investigate. Then it was high noon with a north wind stirring and dust, beat up by a dozen hard riders, blowing into his face. Nofire saw a shine and recognized it as a sheriff's star. Too drowsy to think of either flight or resistance, he stood blinking until riders jerked up short in front of him.

"Here he is, Schofield. Same Redskin, puffed eyes, swelled lips and all."

Sheriff Schofield of Pocatello swerved and his black horse shoveled to a dusty halt. "Yep. Answers description, all right. Fetch him along." Schofield moved off to where squaws sat huddled around huge, steaming kettles. Snatching a wooden spoon from one of them, he ladled until up came a dog's jaw. He glanced around. Over a scaffold pole hung two limp dog hides—Great Danes. Schofield snatched them off. "We'll take these as evidence."

Chief Unquaha emerged from his tipi and stood erect, six-feet-six, a shriveled but stern savage. A venerable counsellor approached.

"Sheriff come for Nofire. Say Nofire steal dogs from show people in Pocatello. He arrest Nofire. Send regrets to great chief Unquaha."

Unquaha was unmoved. "Chief Unquaha respect white man's law in white man's town. Have treaty that say so. Let them take Nofire." He turned and quietly reentered his tipi.

Schofield's officers took Nofire away on a spare horse, brought along for his convenience. He'd be gone a year, Schofield announced gruffly. Maybe five years. It was time Indians learned not to steal other people's property, including dogs, especially show people's dogs, which couldn't be replaced between Sioux Falls and Sacramento.

BIG MUSKRAT, present for first feast day and for whatever excitement it might bring, stood with arms folded across his mighty chest. That they took Nofire away and would put him in jail touched nothing sensitive in Muskrat. That which touched and disgusted him was what

occurred soon afterwards. A robe was spread near a steaming kettle, Indians formed two lines, and chief Unquaha in painted robe and war bonnet walked majestically between them. When he was seated, a counsellor on each side, young bucks executed a feast dance, a wise man made a speech, and a squaw served up a bowl of dog stew which she gave to a counsellor, who passed it to Unquaha.

A general gobble-gobble commenced them.

Because of a tingling and a quiver in his insides, Muskrat knew that Song-at-Dawn had slipped up behind him.

She said, "Big Muskrat not eat."

Not until she had come round to where he could see her without sacrifice of dignity did Muskrat lower his eyes. Nothing changed in his face, though her beauty made him miserably aware of that great emptiness in his bosom she had put there. "Me not eat dog meat," he said scornfully.

"For great chief Unquaha it would be a sign of respect."

"Muskrat respect great chief Unquaha. Muskrat not eat dog meat got by Nofire. Muskrat proud."

Her eyelashes lowered. "Muskrat have much pride. Muskrat make Song-at-Dawn very sad."

"Muskrat come back tomorrow." He turned his back upon her, object of a hunger in him that no meat, dog or other, could satisfy.

He went home to his cabin, replenished his fire, went out and sat on a hill to watch its smoke rise and streak away, lifted and dandled by a north wind. Thereafter he walked among his cattle, paused to gaze affectionately upon his fat white-faced steer—Steer-That-Won-A-Prize. One look at his fine steer, and he despised Unquaha's third feast day. Let a wind sweep it away. Let it wither like a fallen leaf. Steer-That-Won-A-Prize would never make stew for a band of lazy Bannocks. Equally he despised Try-Again-Nofire and Shaggy Horse. They were stupid for Unquaha's feast-day trickery.

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But while Nofire was on his way to jail, Shaggy Horse was having his luck in a grassy dell in Wyoming's high mountains. He had killed not one elk, but nine. There he had removed their entrails, their fat carcasses he had packed in snow high on a mountainside. Between shooting wolves that came sniffing and howling, he made three sets of drag poles from strong mountain ash, a set for each pack horse. By nightfall he was ready. His decision to travel by night had its origin in appearance of strange riders far away in a mountain valley, no doubt on his trail, as a law violator.

By morning he was many miles from his snowy camp ground. By night he and his horses were rested. By another he was within sight of Unquaha's village, and it was second feast day. Night had brought freezing cold, a turn which stiffened his elk carcasses, kept them fresh for his day of triumph. In order that every Bannock, from scampering rabbit to fat squaw and wrinkled counsellor—to old Unquaha himself—might witness his glorious entry into their village, he rested until sunlight gold-tinted every hill and mountaintop. Then, raising a war-whoop, he lashed his horses into a laborious run. Indians saw him coming, dust boiling up from drag-poles and thundering hoofs, Shaggy Horse waving and shouting.

What they did not see, until Shaggy horse had brought his rich booty to a halt in their midst, was a posse of lawmen winding down a distant hill on Shaggy Horse's trail. Nor did they hear pounding hoofs until a dust cloud made itself prominent east of their village. Then their yells died, and they stared sullenly at a score of white men who came up at a hard gallop, every man with two .45's at his hips and a repeating rifle in a scabbard.

Sheriff Bockfinger of Uinta county, Wyoming, halted his men. "He's here, all right."

Men rode up, giving Indians a choice between clearing a path and getting tramped, or maybe gun-whacked. Shaggy Horse was standing by his game, where he had been about to begin a speech in praise of his own hunting prowess. A black-bearded white man took hold of Shaggy Horse's saddle-mount.

"Get on, Redskin."

Chief Unquaha appeared like a thundercloud before them. "Ho! Why you come?"

Sheriff Bockfinger rode forward. "We come to arrest your thievin' hunter, your violator of Wyoming's game laws."

"This not Wyoming," said Unquaha.

Bockfinger scowled. This shriveled old Bannock had a point there. "We follow his trail, great chief Unquaha. A case of hot pursuit, which makes it legal."

"We have treaty with great white father. Treaty say Bannock can hunt on land of great white father."

"Your treaty is no good now," declared Bockfinger, rising anger kept in restraint. "Wyoming is a state and has its own laws."

Unquaha's head moved slowly, his fierce old eyes counting his few warriors. Bockfinger's men lifted their six-guns, every man of them itching to shoot some Redskins. Unquaha had seen brave warriors die in battle before superior power. Guns spelled authority. Twenty men, armed and ready to kill, put wisdom in his angry, stubborn head.

"Chief Unquaha promise to keep peace. It is white man who break treaty, not Unquaha. Go, and evil spirits devour you."

"At least you show sound judgement," said Bockfinger, "though I can't say much for your manners." He gave his head a jerk. "All right, men, take him. Take his horses and his elk, too."

BIG MUSKRAT stood to one side, arms folded across his chest. He watched them take Shaggy Horse away. Muskrat felt of his own head, where there was still a sore spot. Except for that, he might have known a touch of sympathy for his unfortunate rival. Indeed, he might have put himself down as a renegade and traitor to a Bannock half-brother. But remembering how Shaggy Horse and Nofire had conspired to booger him, he put away remorse and watched impassively until cavalcade and dust had disappeared toward Wyoming.

Yet indifference to Shaggy Horse's fate had no counterpart in his attitude toward those who watched with him. Their eyes had not been for Shaggy Horse, but for his drag-poles of fat elk that went away with him. Second feast day, a second day of lazy, wolfish gobble-gobble, had gone glimmering, and it was for that which Unquaha's lazy band looked so very sad.

"Big Muskrat does not look happy," said Song-at-Dawn. She had come close to his side. "But tomorrow is third feast day. Feast day is bad luck. Song-at-Dawn is afraid Muskrat next to go away."

Muskrat half-turned and gave her a determined look. "Tomorrow before sunrise Muskrat come for you. Meet him where horses tied in gulch. Goodbye."

Muskrat rode homeward, a cold north wind in his face.

●

Next day water-filled kettles in Unquaha's village had fires under them. It was Muskrat's day to make big feed. But an hour before noon he had not come. Moreover, Song-at-Dawn could not be found.

Great chief Unquaha was much concerned. His brow darkened into thundercloud ungliness. He summoned his chief counsellor.

"Bring my best horse and summon every warrior in my village. We ride to Muskrat's cabin; we burn and

slay, and never will a Bannock defy great Unquaha again."

When Unquaha and his band, thirty strong, topped a low ridge and looked down into Muskrat's peaceful valley, their anger and their blood lust rose to danger pitch. More smoke than ever before rose from Muskrat's stone chimney, to be whipped and driven over fields and hills.

But then to Unquaha's anger-dilated nostrils came an aroma that vanquished his wrath as by magic. In that traveling smoke came a smell of food, not just any kind of food, but of beef-liver hash, flavored high with sage and onions. It was Unquaha's favorite dish, and nobody could make it to his taste except Song-at-Dawn, daughter of his winter years.

Unquaha rode a little ahead of his band, then turned and made a speech. With wind driving around him, flapping his robe and whipping his horse's tail and mane, he presented a picture of austere grandeur and heroism. His words brought up visions of his warrior years, of scalps he had taken, of long marches and bitter battles. Somewhat hastily he passed over his defeats, of victories of white men, of humiliation of his Bannock and Shoshone brothers and their being herded onto reservations, of his many wives, many daughters and few sons.

At long last he said, "This insult of Big Muskrat was for me alone, not for you, my braves. So I go alone to avenge it. Back you will go, to keep peace in my village."

Sorrowfully they watched him turn about and ride slowly down into Muskrat's peaceful valley, a great chief whose mighty spirit had been broken at last.

Nesters, Dig Your Graves!

(*continued from page 58*)

Sagging himself, he caught her against his shoulder. Her head dropped on his chest and he held her firmly.

"You were right," he told her gently. "Those folks do need a doctor. Pull yourself together; we're going back to them."

Her face lifted up for him and he read the yearning in her eyes. He bent and pressed a kiss against her mouth. Her hands came around his neck and drew him back.

He grinned stiffly through his bruises. "I'm taking you down river soon as the farmers get back in shape. I want to get straight on that tinhorn business; and then I've got a parson friend who'll be happy to marry us, Jenny. We'll start out right."

"Start right, Phil Lancey!" she echoed faintly, "with a honeymoon trip on that old *Lexington Star!*"

There was color in her cheeks and her eyes were sparkling, her lips waiting. After the wedding they would come back and help build the valley into a good place to live.

★

Old Rance McCullogh had only one way of dealing with a neighbor who stepped out of line, whatever the reason. And that way was heading him directly into a needless, bloody range-war.

Maverick Mutineer

by JIM BREWER

ED McCullough was riding the rimrock when he came on the puncher hazing Circle 7 cows through the clefts in the rocky barrier onto the well-watered Paintbrush range. He halted his horse and sat watching the top of the man's hat as he forced the cows through the timber and into the clefts. When he had finished, the man himself came up onto Windbreak Ridge. He was Stan Peters, Circle 7's ramrod. He gave a little start when he saw that he had been caught, but his lips twisted into a contemptuous grin as he recognized Ed.

It was a year of drought and Ed had seen a lot of Circle 7 stock on his side of the rimrock. He touched spurs to his mount and rode over to Peters. "What's the big idea?" he demanded.

The grin grew insolent. "What are *you* going to do about it?" the ramrod asked.

Peters was a tough character who looked down on young McCullough because he had been to college; apparently, he thought that higher learning was a sign of weakness, and was itching for a chance to prove his superiority.

Ed hesitated and the foreman spat

Old Rance bulled his way into everything . . .

contemptuously and reached for his makings; obviously enjoying the situation. He rolled a cigarette, the contemptuous grin growing on his lips. But suddenly he saw something beyond Ed and the cigarette fell from his fingers; his hand fell to the stag handle of the sixgun at his hip.

Ed turned and saw Rance McCullough, his father and owner of the Paintbrush Ranch, riding toward them. Rance halted his horse near them, his eyes taking in the scene and surmising what had happened. "Push them cows back onto Circle 7!" he said shortly.

Rance McCullough was of the old school. He'd had to fight his way through life and was seemingly as tough and active at sixty as he had ever been. His gray eyes bored into Peters.

Wordlessly, the foreman put spurs to his horse and worked the cattle back over the rimrock while Rance and Ed sat watching him. When he had finished, he started down himself.

But Rance stopped him. "Wait a minute!"

Peters checked his mount, and the rancher swung off his horse and started grimly for the ramrod. Stan looked wildly about, then drew his gun and pointed it at Rance. "Hold it, McCullough!"

But Rance paid no attention to the revolver. He swatted it aside as it exploded, the bullet digging harmlessly into the ground. He wrapped a big hand in the ramrod's shirt and pulled him from the saddle. Before Peters could get his balance, he drove a knotted fist to his jaw. The blow sent the foreman back five feet and sprawled him backwards on the ground.

Peters shook his head and brought up his gun for another shot, but the old man kicked quickly and the weapon went flying through the air. Rance stepped back and Peters sprang up to his feet.

They closed and stood toe-to-toe, swapping sledgehammer blows. Peters was as big as Rance, but he was thirty years younger. Rance took what the ramrod gave, however, and dished out more. He rocked Stan back on his heels, followed through with more jolting lefts and rights, then dropped him senseless to the ground.

The rancher brushed a great mane of silvery hair from his eyes and paused to catch his breath. He glanced up at Ed. "Give me a hand!" he said curtly.

ED KNEW that his father was disappointed in him. Rance wanted his son to be like himself: wont to ride the meanest horse in the valley, whip the toughest man he saw, outdrink everybody in rotgut whiskey and keep his feet. But Ed, though he loved his father, had always thought him somewhat loud and headstrong, had grown up slightly ashamed of him and never tried to measure up to Rance's standards.

He swung quickly off his horse to avoid displeasing his father and helped him pick up the unconscious Peters. Together, following Rance's directions, they set the foreman backwards in his own saddle. The rancher then took Stan's lariat and lashed the ramrod's hands behind him to the horn. They were tying his feet to the stirrups when he came awake.

"Listen to me, Peters!" Rance said in his raucous voice as the ramrod looked at them with sullen eyes. "If I ever catch you doing this again, I'll chase you out of the valley so fast you'll think your rump is in front of you. And you can tell them other Circle 7 sheepherders not to try it, or they'll get the same!"

Hatred burned in the foreman's gaze as he answered. "I ain't forgettin' this, McCullough!"

Rance snorted contemptuously. He picked up his hat and swatted the horse with it. The mustang went over the rimrock toward home, and they watched Peters bobbing helplessly in

the saddle until horse and rider were out of sight.

"That ought to teach him," Rance said, turning to Ed. "He won't forget this lesson in a hurry."

Ed grinned wryly. "I think there might have been some other way of handling him; you just made yourself an enemy."

Rance spat contemptuously. "Huh! A man ain't a man unless he's got two or three enemies."

Ed had heard his father make that statement many times. He knew that Rance had heard someone say it, reflected on it for a moment, then adopted it as part of his own philosophy. "A man can't have too many friends," he said. "I believe he shouldn't have any enemies if he can help it."

Rance glared at him. "I wish you hadn't gone to that college," he said bitterly. "They put so many fool ideas into your head, you won't listen to your father when he tries to tell you something. I know from experience, while them professors try to learn from books.

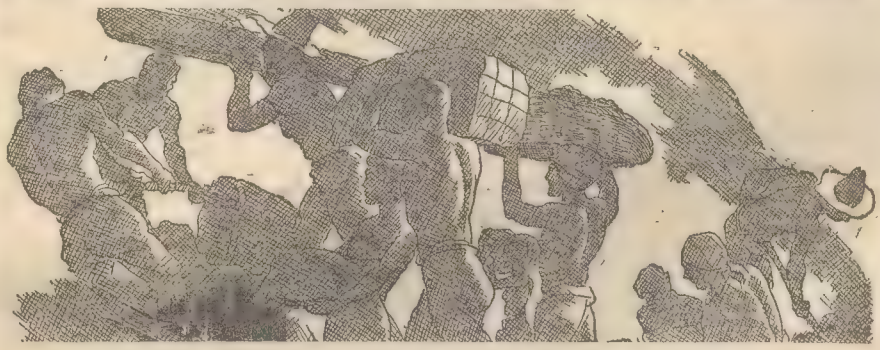
"I came into this valley when it was frontier, carved Paintbrush from the wilderness and fought injuns and rustlers to hold it. I weathered storm and drought and fever and epidemic. And look what the ranch is today!"

Ed listened wearily. He had heard this same harangue so many times he could recite it from memory. There was no doubt that Rance had chosen wisely when he'd staked out Paintbrush. The ranch was fenced by a natural border of rimrock with one pass, "gateway" they called it, in one side of the rectangular boundary wall. There was plenty of water, wet year or dry, and miles of rich grazing land. But his father's methods of utilizing his resources were almost primitive, and he refused to consider any of the changes Ed suggested, argue though the boy might.

"I'm sorry, dad."

[*Turn Page*]

Did the Nam Invasion Mean Slavery for Man?



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"You're always sorry. But you won't try to listen and learn from the old man. You're too damn full of book-learning for that!"

THEY STARTED back toward the ranch-house. It was mid-morning, and already the blistering heat of another day was upon them. They rode through range that was ordinarily soggy the year around; but this year it had dried and cracked, and the cracks looked like ripples on an earthen sea. Where the bass croaking of bullfrogs had filled the air before, was only a dead silence now, Ed observed, and knew that if Paintbrush was suffering this much, the other ranches were in difficult straits, too.

They passed several herds of cattle, and each time they rode through the groups, inspecting them. There was a lot of Circle 7 stock in the herds and Ed noticed his father's lips tighten belligerently as he counted the alien brands. Rance was getting angry, but, as was his way lately, he said nothing. When they came to the corral, his father dismounted and stalked silently to the big ranch house.

They ate at noontime with the crew, and, after dinner, Rance called Ed and two of the hands together. "Get your guns and meet me at the corral," he said shortly.

Ed went to his room, buckled on his six-gun, took his carbine, and reported to the corral. The others had armed themselves in a similar manner and they waited for Rance. He came to them, jammed his carbine into the boot and mounted without a word. They swung into the saddle and followed him toward gateway.

Ed had had an uneasy feeling since he'd watched his father counting Circle 7 cows that morning, and now he began to worry. He was afraid that Rance, in this mood, might get into serious trouble. He wanted to talk the problem over with his father—but any

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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opposition on his part would only strengthen Rance's purpose.

They went through gateway and headed for Circle 7. They rode into the yard before the ranch house and and reined up. Ed saw the hands who were standing about observe the guns of the visitors and move for the bunkhouse and their own weapons in anticipation of trouble. A silence fell over the ranch as activity ceased and everyone waited for the visitors to declare their purpose.

"Worster!" Rance bellowed for Cy Worster, manager of the Circle 7, without dismounting.

There was another silence. Ed glanced at the bunkhouse and saw the crew lining the windows.

"Worster!" Rance bellowed again. "Damn your soul, come out here!"

The door of the house opened and a dapper, medium-sized man stepped onto the porch. Cy Worster was well-groomed and well-dressed and a silver-plated six-gun adorned one thigh. He smiled placatingly at Rance.

"Hello, Rance," he said quietly. "Light a spell."

Cy Worster was an Easterner and somewhat dudish. He operated the Circle 7 for a syndicate of Eastern interests and, being a newcomer, wasn't familiar with the ways of the valley man. Ed knew that a shrewd and ambitious mind was behind Worster's polite manner however; and there was a hint of ruthlessness in some of his actions.

"Worster!" Rance ignored the Circle 7 manager's invitation and came right to the point. "I caught your foreman, Peters, moving your stuff onto my range today!"

"You made a mistake," Worster said blandly. "With this dry weather, those cows were thirsty and drifting toward water. My foreman caught up with them and was trying to drive them back when you mistook his actions."

Rance snorted angrily. "Hogwash! You ain't been here long or you wouldn't insult my intelligence with a

yarn like that. Those cows wouldn't have gone over the rimrock unless they were driven."

Worster flushed. "Are you saying I'm a liar?"

"I'm not a man to play games," Rance stated flatly. "I call them as I see them!"

WORSTER'S face went white. Behind him, Ed saw Peters pull the curtains of a window aside, a drawn gun in his hand. He glanced sideways at the bunkhouse, and knew Worster had but to give the word and they would be caught in a snarling pocket of hot lead.

But his father's voice held no trace of fear. "Paintbrush is full of Circle 7 stock. I counted thirty head this morning; I want you to get that stuff off my range and keep it off!"

Worster looked speculatively at Rance. "I can't hold my stock on Circle 7. Those poor critters are thirsty; they'll just naturally drift toward water."

Rance's eyes narrowed. He sat studying Worster for fully a minute. When he spoke, his voice was hard. "Tomorrow morning, if you haven't started cutting your stuff, I'm going to give orders to shoot every Circle 7 cow on Paintbrush!"

Worster gasped. "You can't do that!"

Rance had no more to say. He turned his horse.

Worster ran off the porch. "Wait, Mr. McCullough! Let's talk this over."

Rance put spurs to his horse and started from the yard.

Worster shook his fist, and yelled, "If it's fight you want, it's fight you'll get!"

Ed and the two punchers followed Rance, and the young cowboy held his breath until they were out of gunrange, half expecting a vindictive fusillade from Worster and his men.

They rode silently back to Paintbrush where Rance dismounted, leav-

[*Turn Page*]

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ing his horse for the crew to unsaddle. Ed stripped the gear from his mustang, then went to the house where he found Rance angrily pacing the floor of his room.

"Dad," he said, "you're not really going to carry out that threat and shoot Circle 7 cows tomorrow "

It was the wrong thing for him to say; he realized that as soon as he saw the antagonistic expression on his father's face.

"You're damn right, I am! No dude is going to come here and water and feed his cows on my range. Why, if he leaves his stock there, come fall, Paintbrush will look like sheep have been on it. My ranch can't take more cattle than I've got on it."

Ed sank into a chair and watched his father pace for a time. Then he tried again. "Worster's a newcomer, dad, and he's trying to make a good showing. It's his first year and it happens to be a year of drought. He's so anxious to make a profit, he'll try anything. I think if you went to him, man-to-man, you could talk this over and make him understand that he can't stay in the valley if he doesn't respect the rights of his neighbors."

"That's what I've done!" Rance said grimly.

"Yes, but you haven't given him a chance to back down gracefully; his pride won't let him give orders to cut those herds tomorrow and we'll be right in the middle of a range war!"

"Paintbrush has fought its range-wars before," Rance said, "and it won't back from this one."

"But a *range war,* dad!" Ed exclaimed.

Rance looked at the younger man and his lip curled. "I never thought I'd live to see the day," he said—"the day I realized that my son is a coward!"

Ed stiffened. He looked angrily at his father, a hot flood of words at his lips. But he choked them back and stormed from the room.

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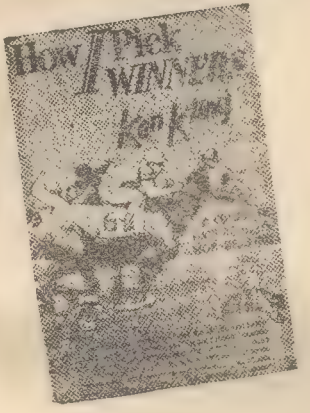

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THE NEXT morning after breakfast, Rance called the crew together and told them to pack their guns and shoot every Circle 7 cow they found on Paintbrush range. The men listened in silence, then moved to the bunkhouse for their weapons.

Ed took his artillery and, without asking his father for orders as he usually did, saddled and rode out. He headed for the rimrock to see if Worster had a crew moving the Circle 7 stock back to home range, even though he realized it was too much to hope for.

Worster, he reflected, had been relying heavily on the advice of his foreman, Stan Peters. The ramrod, anxious to insure his position, had suggested moving as many of their cattle as possible onto Paintbrush to weather the drought. The manager, although not openly sanctioning the plan, had, nevertheless, given his unspoken approval in the hope of making a good showing for himself. The trouble was that Worster, once he had allowed the first step to be taken, had no choice but to stick to his guns as the situation had begun to explode into an open range war. And now that Rance had made an enemy of Peters...

He hit the rimrock a little above gateway and began to follow the rocky barrier. He saw no sign of Circle 7 riders, as he had feared, though the herds he passed were full of Worster's stock. His mouth twisted into a thin, bitter line. If Rance kept his word and shot all the Circle 7 cows he found, the range would make a horrible picture by nightfall.

But when he neared the spot where he and Rance had caught Peters the day before, even he grew angry. The same herd of cattle his father had made the ramrod work back over the rimrock were contentedly grazing on Paintbrush grass.

He halted his mustang and sat bitterly looking at the cattle. What was the sense of his worrying about Wors-

ter, when the rancher was deliberately asking for trouble? The fool should have had sense enough to see that his best course of action was appeasement.

A rider appeared from the direction of ranch headquarters. As he came nearer, Ed recognized his father. Rance saw the herd and pulled his carbine from the boot even before he reached it. The weapon leaped to his shoulder and exploded, and one of the animals went down, kicking.

Another shot sounded. It could have been an echo of the first, but it came from the rimrock. Rance dropped his gun and fell from the saddle.

Stupefied with amazement, Ed watched a figure climb from the rimrock. Suddenly he yanked his own carbine from the boot and threw it to his shoulder. As the figure started for his father, he triggered. The bullet dug up dust about five feet beyond the man. He looked toward Ed, then headed back for the rimrock at a run.

Ed drove spurs into his mount and galloped toward the rimrock. He leaped from the saddle by the barrier and threw himself full length on the ground. Gun ready, he peered over the barrier.

He saw nothing. Then suddenly he caught a glimpse of horse and rider fleeing into the timber. The rider was Stan Peters. Ed got to his feet, his face grim. Peters had fulfilled his promise of the day before.

ED WENT to his father. The old man lay unconscious, a gasping wound in his chest. His breathing was faint, and fear for Rance turned Ed's heart cold.

He bound the wound with strips torn from his own shirt. He caught up the horses and lashed the old man into his saddle. Then he headed for the ranch house. It was slow travelling, for he had to lead Rance's horse slowly to cause the old man as little

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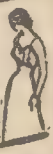

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pain as possible. His father slumped over the horse's neck and several times Ed thought him dead only to ride back and find a weak but steady pulse.

They reached the ranch near noon and Ed immediately sent one of the hands for a doctor. He sent another to round up the men and bring them to gateway. He and the cook carried Rance into the house. The old man still hadn't regained consciousness and his pulse to Ed's worried fingers was weaker. The boy grimly ordered the cook to watch him and spurred his horse toward gateway.

Now, he realized that the chips were down and his hand was being called. Peters, having made his play, would follow through by convincing Worster that they might as well move their cattle to Paintbrush. He would figure that Rance was either dead, or in bed for a long time, and that he could handle any opposition he got from Ed. The youth's lips tightened as he realized that the ramrod had attempted murder and might do so again.

The men had assembled at gateway when he got there. He looked toward Circle 7 and saw a cloud of dust moving toward them. He had figured right, he thought grimly; Peters had lost no time in carrying out his scheme. Ed would have less time than he had hoped for to attempt a defense.

He looked around gateway and, selecting the most strategic positions for a fight, posted his men. He cautioned them not to fire until he gave the word, then rode alone into the center of the pass.

His neighbors were driving cattle toward gateway and Ed watched the animals' speed increase as they smelled the water beyond the rimrock. Worster and Peters were riding to one side, out of the dust, and Ed saw Peters shout an order as they neared him. The crew immediately began to mill the herd.

Ed drew his pistol and held it from

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their view as he watched. Once the cattle were still, Peters and Worster rode toward him.

His father had always handled the trouble before this, and now a small thread of fear worked through his mind. But he forced it aside and lifted the gun as the two men came within ten feet of him. "That's far enough!" he shouted.

They kept coming. Worster's face was expressionless, but Peters wore a contemptuous grin.

He hated the very sight of that grin. His finger tightened on the trigger and the gun roared.

He had aimed high, but nervousness brought the gun down so the slug tore the hat from the foreman's head and sent it sailing. Startled, the two men jerked their horses to a halt and glared at him.

"Get out of the way, McCullough," Peters grated harshly, "and you won't get hurt!"

He hesitated for a moment and the foreman's face twisted into that contemptuous grin again. Ed hated that grin.

"The two of you turn around and hightail," he said, "and take that herd with you. You're not moving onto Paintbrush!"

The ramrod sneered. "Get out of the way!" He started to knee his horse forward, but Ed cocked the hammer on his gun and he stopped.

"He talking for Circle 7?" Ed asked Worster.

The manager stiffened. "Of course not," he said harshly. "Shut up, Peters!"

The ramrod flushed but said nothing. He glared at Ed.

Ed realized it would be to his advantage to let Worster take the offensive. He sat waiting.

THERE were several moments of an uncomfortable silence. Then Worster spoke. "My cows have got to have water, and Paintbrush has got enough for your stock and mine;

we're coming through!"

Ed shook his head. "If your herds came onto Paintbrush, they'd ruin it."

"I've got to have water. Get out of the way!"

Ed adamantly shook his head. "You can sell."

Worster blanched. "Beef prices are way down; I'll take a terrible loss." Determination came into his eyes. "I have no choice; I've got to water my cattle." He raised his hand to signal the crew waiting behind him.

"Hold it!" Ed cried. He pointed to his crew hidden in the rimrock. "You'll have to fight to get through!"

Worster looked at the Paintbrush crew and back at his own men, apparently weighing the chances of his forcing his way through the pass.

"Look, Mr. Worster," Ed said quickly. "You're still a young man, and you're smart—or you wouldn't be where you are today. Think this over. If you try to fight, you may or may not succeed. Either way a lot of good men, including possibly you, yourself, will die. And you will have started a range-war, something your backers won't stand for.

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Worster's eyes bored into Ed's. Then something went out of him and a wry grin twisted his face.

"You win, kid. I'll have my men cut Circle 7 stuff from your range and move it back tomorrow. And.... thanks."

He turned to Peters. "Come on, Stan; let's get out of here."

"Just a minute!" Ed said.

They looked at him.

"Peters bushwhacked my father today; he's got to answer to me for it!"

Worster swung an astonished face to the ramrod. "I thought you said

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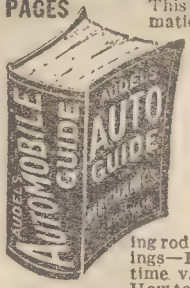

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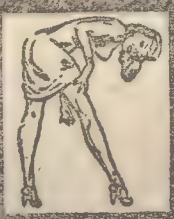
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you and Rance shot it out, and—"

"Never mind!" Peters interrupted; "this is going to be a pleasure." The contemptuous grin was back on his face and he dismounted confidently.

Ed swung one leg over the saddle and slid from the horse. As he was in mid-air, the ramrod started his draw. Ed let himself fall to the ground as Stan's first shot split the air where he would have been standing if he had landed upright. He rolled as the ramrod's second shot dug into the dirt by his head.

But now he triggered. Peters staggered backward as the bullet took him through the middle. He fought to bring his gun up again. Ed aimed and shot, and the foreman fell face forward and lay still.

The doctor was climbing into his buckboard when Ed returned to the house. He assured the youth that his father would recover, and Ed went in to see Rance. The old man was propped up on his pillow, a weak smile on his face.

"They told me what you did, son, and I don't know what to say," he said in a weak voice.

"Don't say anything, dad, I just did what had to be done."

But Rance shook his head. "No, I've got to say this. I've suddenly realized that I don't know everything; as a matter of fact, I must be as dumb as those cows out there!"

He looked up at Ed. "Son, will you run Paintbrush for me?"

A lump came into Ed's throat. He looked at Rance and noticed a new awareness in his father's bearing. He considered a moment, and likened it to the tempering of fine steel; and he realized that Rance had learned a lesson few men know.

He smiled. "No, dad; let's run it together."

Rance broke into a smile and extended his hand. They shook, and Ed realized that father and son had found each other again.

★

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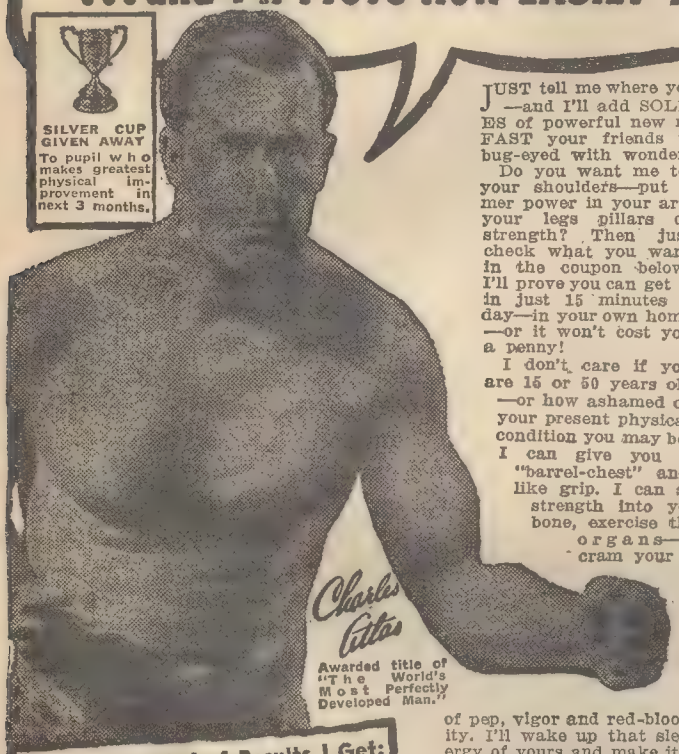
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ANSWER

To The Quiz Story "No Sass But Sassparilla"

No gun will put all its bullets through exactly the same hole on the target. That crazy drink made by the bartender is true stuff.

REFERENCES

1. "Great Shooting Stories," edited by Stuart D. Ludlum. Doubleday and Co. Inc. Garden City, 1947. See page 90 for Wes Hardin's boast of "no sass but sassparilla."

2. "Six Years With the Texas Rangers," by James B. Gillett. The Lakeside Press. Chicago, Ill. 1943. See page 317 where Ranger Lloyd slips wrong bullet into rifle.

3. "Crossroads of America," by Darrell Garwood. W. W. Norton & Co. New York, 1948. See page 111 for idea of having same caliber revolver and rifle.

4. "Famous Sheriffs & Western Outlaws," by William MacLeod Raine. The New Home Library. New York, 1944. See page 96 for that gambling description of a Main Street.

5. "Wild Bill Hickock," by J. W. Buel. Atomic Books, Inc. New York, 1946. See page 24 for that old-but successful trick-of getting man off guard.

6. "Little Annie Oakley And Other Rugged People," by Stewart H. Holbrook. The Macmillan Company. New York, 1948. See pages 47-8 for that famous drink.

7. "Winchester Ammunition Handbook." New Haven, Conn. Third Edition, 1952. See page 43 for statement, "No gun will put all its bullets through exactly the same hole on the target."

8. "Reminiscences Of An Old Timer," by Col. George Hunter. H. S. Crocker and Co. San Francisco, 1887. See page 94 for throwing drink into face.

★

Strikes of Misfortune

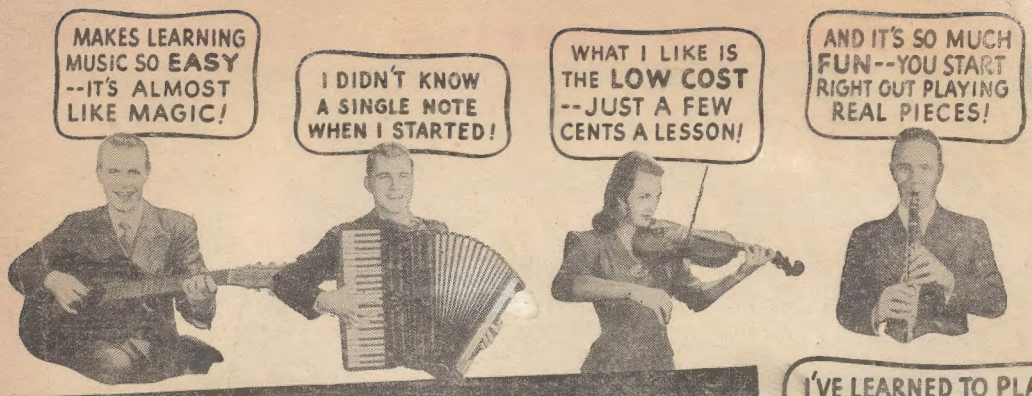
(*continued from page 70*)

his closely-guarded maps and reports of the region tucked into his pack. They were heading for Mud Springs, by way of Georgetown, and had crossed Lake Tahoe (then known as Lake Bigler) when they were engulfed in a blizzard. They wandered for days, and were finally forced to kill their pack-mule. They roasted the meat and took as much as they could carry.

When it became apparent that they could not even carry their packs any longer, they ate as much of the meat as they could hold, and started again. Alan Grosh found a hollow tree trunk and cached his valuable papers inside. He marked the tree, stuffed brush into the hole, and pushed on after the Canadian. After several more days, they lay down in the snow to die. For a few brief minutes, they actually were frozen, when a hunting party stumbled on them. They were rushed to the settlement-house of Last Chance, Placer County, where the Canadian's feet were amputated and Grosh died.

Later, when the Comstock Lode was re-discovered, it returned $100,000,000 in the blue ore that yields silver.

★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